if we were lovers

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Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationship:	Harry Potter/Tom Riddle
Characters:	Harry Potter, Tom Riddle, Alphard Black, Theodore Nott, Gaspar Avery, Abraxas Malfoy, Richard Lestrange, Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Luna Lovegood, Minerva McGonagall, Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Muggle, Alternate Universe - Theatre, Timeline Mashup, (as an example : sirius is alphard's uncle), set in the 90's, Same Age Tom & Harry, Academic rivals, Rivals to Friends to Lovers, or : people who don't like each other (one sided) to friends to lovers, Friendship, Falling In Love, Mutual Pining, please blame the characters i only work here, Slow Burn, Touch-Starved Harry Potter, Touch-Starved Tom Riddle, Fluff, minimal angst, Domestic Fluff, Drama, Hurt/Comfort, Eventual Smut, Explicit Sexual Content, Romance, Shakespeare, Playwriting, Mentions of alcoholism, Mentions of Substance Abuse, (both pertaining to a secondary character), Drinking, Smoking, Recreational Drug Use, POV Harry Potter, Beta Read, Updates bi-weekly, (every tuesday & friday), one scene in act 1 has a splash of bodyshaming so TW
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if we were lovers

by reggieblk

Summary

When Harry arrives at the most prestigious theatrical school in the country, under very suspicious circumstances, he doesn't have many expectations. The most unexpected thing he encounters, however, is one Tom Riddle.

Amidst peers of great talent, his worry for his Godfather, unconventional Professors, and a vague sense of unworthiness, Harry falls in love with the only other person who deals with feelings as well as him.

But maybe, just maybe, he and Tom will find out that not all love stories have to end in tragedy.

Notes

hello !! back on my bullshit with another long work (for any of you wondering : no, I don't have a life I legit spend my days writing lol)
about this one though :
- initially inspired by the book If We Were Villains by M.L. Rio, but the inspiration stops after Act I, and is more or less only inspired in vibe. Check the AN at the end of Act I to know exactly what was taken from the book! (those of you who have read the book will know as you read hehe)
- a lot of extracts of text are taken from the books/plays they're said to be from in the fic (if you want to know in which part such and such happens, ask me and I can probably find it for you!) - these parts are signalled by being italisized or centered
- in case you haven't seen my posts on Tumblr : there are only 6 parts for a total of over 260 000 words; 5 Acts and an interlude, so prepare for each upload to be very long!
- updates happen every Tuesday and Friday for 3 weeks - the fic is entirely written already of course

Lastly, am I qualified to be doing in depth renditions of one of the plays mentioned in this fic via tomarry fanfiction? No, not really. I did study literature in school but that doesn't mean I can't make mistakes. This is my disclaimer to say : it's probably not perfect, and maybe the understanding I have of some of the text isn't yours. Please keep in mind this is just for fun, I am no expert and I do not claim to be.
Additionally, do I know anything about theatre? No, no I do not. If some things are wildly wrong in this fic...sorry xx

A huge thank you to my Beta reader: SilverWolf12 who did an amazing job, and who actually wrote something for the Interlude of this fic (you'll see when we get there)! And to my friends Csibi and Mimi who were always great sources of motivation! <3

Here's the Spotify playlist I made for this fic : if we were lovers (you can see my other playlists for other unpublished fics on my profile too)

And, as always, you can find me on Tumblr : @reggieblk where I would be more than happy to chat about this fic. (Also, yes, there will be memes for this one too once I finish posting it.)

Happy reading x

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Act I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ACT I

— Scene one —

Harry was *late*, which was the one thing he really didn't need to be. The circumstances were suspicious enough, he didn't need to add 'tardiness' to his repertoire of possible defects. It wasn't his fault, per se, it was more Sirius's than his, anyway.

His Godfather couldn't stand the idea of him leaving for so long. Harry had bitten his tongue to avoid reminding him that they had spent the majority of their lives apart. He had been reluctant to get in the car with Sirius, if he was being honest. The man reeked of whiskey despite him 'being sober' ever since he took Harry in.

He'd gotten in anyway, not letting the prospect of an accident come between him and the dream he'd been chasing since he was old enough to talk. *At least it's not the motorbike*, Harry had thought as he'd climbed into the passenger seat.

He'd gotten to the school in one piece anyway, albeit *late* as Sirius had insisted on having intense road rage which sparked another conductor's road rage which led to them actually getting out of their respective cars to *fist fight* by the side of the road—Harry didn't want to dwell on it. He didn't want to dwell on their goodbyes either, because Sirius had actually *cried*, while Harry was desperately checking the time, knowing he was already late but not having the heart to leave Sirius hanging.

It had been a morning.

He was currently running—which wouldn't make for a good first impression, what with him sweating profusely—through the hallways of the castle, in desperate search of the classroom he was supposed to be in *at that moment*. He had dropped his belongings off in the front office as he'd been instructed to do and they had indicated the way to his classroom. They'd all given him foul looks for being late.

Harry supposed turning up late on his first day at one of Britain's most exclusive and prestigious schools wasn't the *best* course of action. Especially since he'd gotten in under 'special circumstances' which he couldn't think about too much lest he break out into a much worse nervous sweat.

He was at Hogwarts Academy for the Classical Arts, known as HACA amongst the general population of Britain, or simply Hogwarts. It was a most prestigious and expensive school that specialised in the Arts: music, philosophy, ancient languages, writing, art, and theatre—for which Harry was attending. He was to join the seventh year theatre students for their last year in the school. Students were supposed to attend from the age of twelve, the first three years comprised of general schooling, despite the curriculum not following any traditional public school's, and the next four years were spent specialising into the field of study the

student chose, at which point the general classes such as History were dropped to focus solely on the Art.

It went without saying that the school was incredibly selective of the students that were allowed to attend. There were families, rich, famous families, who had been attending for generations. Others got in on scholarships, though they remained rare, and others got in through auditions. It was safe to say that Harry's case was an exception. You either got in at twelve or never at all.

Which, at the time, had been devastating as he'd always dreamt of attending the school. But, no matter, he was there now, no need to dwell on the past or how he had gotten there in the first place.

Harry finally arrived on the fourth floor of the—actual, honest to God—*castle* and found the classroom, 7T (*seventh year theatre?* he wondered). He steeled himself in front of the door; he was breathing far too heavily, a few wheezes coming out, and he was sweating horrendously. He was already over half an hour late, what was a few more minutes? He did some deep breathing to get it back to normal while fanning his face, wiping the sweat away whenever it started beading down his temples and down the bridge of his nose, as he willed himself to cool down. He hoped to God he didn't have visible sweat marks down his back or anything.

When it was clear that it was the best he was going to achieve, he reached up a tentative hand, suddenly nervous beyond belief as his heart hammered against his ribcage and his hands started sweating *again*. He wondered if he should bolt—if this had all been some sick joke, if they'd seen right through him and thought they would humour him, only to beat his dreams into the ground once he'd gotten his hopes up.

But he could do nothing but persevere, so he blinked away the thoughts and strengthened his resolve—he'd come this far, he might as well give it a try.

He knocked on the door before he could rethink the action, removing his hand after two knocks as if burned, his heart in his throat.

A man opened the door—a funny looking man. He was old, had a long white beard and white hair, and was wearing some very airy, very *colourful*, robes. Harry stared—in shock? wonder? disbelief? he had no idea but he was staring, mouth agape as he fought to *say something*.

"Hello," the man said cheerily enough. "Can I help you?"

Harry swallowed heavily. "Hi," he managed to say around the lump in his throat. He cleared it quickly, pulling himself together as best he could. "I'm sorry to interrupt, and I'm sorry for being so late, but I'm Harry," trying not to cringe, "the new student?" It came out as more of a question than a statement and he wanted to ram his head into the wall.

"Oh!" the man exclaimed. "Mr. Potter! My, I am sorry my boy, I had forgotten we were to welcome a new student!"

Harry breathed a sigh of utter relief, finally managing a small tentative smile as he was ushered into the room. The man had a hand on his shoulder which was weird but also steadying, so Harry didn't think too much about it. He had to remember that these people would be *nothing* like the people he had previously been around. They'd be more like Sirius than anyone else, and while that was *a lot*, Harry could handle it.

"My dear seventh years," the man started jovially, "you may have heard, but we are to welcome a new face into our company, what say you?"

Harry cringed as the announcement was met with blank, slightly disbelieving, stares. There were six boys in front of him, all sat on sofas and comfy armchairs, not a desk in sight. The room smelled distinctly of lemon tea, and desperately needed to be aired out, the warm end of summer heat sticking in the air.

"Deary me," the man said again, shaking himself, "where on earth is my head today?" he asked, detaching himself from Harry and standing before him. "I am Professor Albus Dumbledore, I will be analysing the plays and texts with you all, while also conducting any auditions you may have to pass."

Auditions. Harry tried not to faint. He nodded, realising Dumbledore expected him to introduce himself. He tried to shake the awkwardness off and looked out of the window for a second, composing himself. It was just acting, this he could do.

"Hi," he greeted steadily, looking at the other boys who were appraising him as if he were something nasty. "I'm Harry, Harry Potter. I hope you won't mind me interrupting your group." It was a bit of a pathetic thing to say but Harry could not think of anything for the life of him.

"A new student?" one of the boys said suddenly, looking at Dumbledore. "In seventh year? What's going on?"

"I understand that this may be a bit unconventional," Dumbledore admitted, holding his hands in front of him. "We have made an exception for Harry—for good reason," he turned to look at him, "I hope."

Harry forced himself to smile, ignoring how the pressure of the Professor's statement was suffocating him. "I won't disappoint you," he said with a bright smile, a lightness to his words that he absolutely did not feel.

Dumbledore seemed satisfied and gave him a broad smile, his eyes alight with it. He gestured toward a sofa holding only one boy whereas some were holding up to three, and said, "Have a seat next to Tom, Harry, I'm sure you can all make your introductions during lunch."

"Of course," Harry said with a nod. "And sorry again for being so late."

Dumbledore chuckled. "It is no issue, my boy."

Harry sat down as the lesson resumed. They seemed to be talking about the merits of a good tragedy—which was on par with what Sirius had told him. Seventh years specialised in

tragedies.

Harry couldn't really concentrate, which was to be expected, he supposed. He was in a completely new environment with people who didn't seem thrilled to see him. They were all casting odd looks at each other, trying to stare Harry down.

He tried not to pay them much mind, folding a leg under himself on the sofa. The only one of the boys that he could openly look at was this Tom who he was sat next to, as he seemed to be the only one to *not care* about him at all, completely absorbed in the lesson.

He was a handsome boy and Harry caught himself staring a couple of times. His brown hair was cut elegantly, curling softly—like a Prince's would, Harry imagined. He was wearing a white shirt and black slacks which complimented his figure *very* well. He seemed tall and thin, and his jawline was mesmerising. Harry found himself wishing he could scrutinise him more closely but didn't dare in the event he got caught in the act.

"And what makes us love tragedies so much?" Dumbledore asked, pulling Harry out of his daydreaming.

Tom raised his hand but didn't wait to be granted speech. "We enjoy watching people suffer," he said, and his voice was nothing like Harry had ever heard. It was deep, *attractive*, and he commandeered the space with only a few words.

"Oh?" Dumbledore prompted, seeming delighted.

Tom shifted, propping an ankle on his knee. "We enjoy watching people suffer in a fictional setting, it relieves us of our very real pain, and our very real sufferings. Tragedy allows us to put our lives into perspective, it is a form of catharsis. Especially when the tragedy concerns a sinful matter, greed or lust or any other sin. Because tragedies are, by definition, tragic, they show the true consequences of such actions."

Harry found himself nodding along to what Tom was saying while listening attentively. He couldn't be sure, but through the eloquent words, he thought he could discern the faint traces of an accent, though he couldn't pinpoint what it was.

"A fair argument," Dumbledore said. "What do you say, Harry?"

His eyes snapped over to the Professor, surprised at being called upon. He shuffled, much less elegantly than Tom had done, and cleared his throat. "I agree," he said, relieved his voice wasn't shaky. He scrambled to find something else. "I think two other important notions in a tragedy are empathy and dramatic irony though."

"In what sense?" Dumbledore asked encouragingly, seeming pleased with Harry's thoughts so far, giving him a bit more confidence.

"Well, we as the audience know that the characters' downfall is inevitable, we know from the very beginning that they're going to meet tragic ends. For their sins," he gestured to Tom, "or simply for the situation they've been put in. We empathise with them, because we know that we've all been in similar situations—tragedies depict real life, only with added drama,

leading the characters to the worst possible outcome, which hardly ever really happens in real life, but that doesn't stop us from worrying about such outcomes, thus the empathy."

Dumbledore nodded, seemingly satisfied. "Very well, and what of the actors? Why would an actor enjoy playing in a tragedy?"

"I think…" Harry hesitated, looking up at the ceiling. "I think there is a part of us, actors or just people, that yearns for that worst possible outcome, because at least then our worries and sufferings would be legitimate. Playing a character who dies for love helps us live out that… that fantasy of some sort."

"How interesting!" Dumbledore exclaimed, sounding genuinely surprised. "Would you all agree?"

Harry turned to look at the others, feeling oddly rooted to the spot as he looked to his right, his eyes locking with Tom's who was staring at him with an intensity that made heat rise up Harry's cheeks. He looked away quickly, the lemon scent of the room suffocating almost, feeling a bead of sweat drip down his spine.

"I think," Tom said, and Harry saw him out of the corner of his eye looking back to the front of the classroom slowly, as if tearing his gaze away, "that playing in a tragedy allows us to be the weak version of ourselves, the ones who would die for something as inconsequential as love. It gives us a sense of superiority when we get back to ourselves. Walking off the stage and leaving behind our potential weaknesses."

"Alright," Dumbledore nodded, seemingly organising his thoughts. "So you would call it a weakness, whereas Harry would call it a fantasy, very interesting. What of the others?"

They looked at each other. Four of them said 'weakness' and Harry had to wonder if that's what they actually thought or if they just didn't want to side with the new student.

"Theodore?" Dumbledore prompted, motioning to the only boy who hadn't given his opinion. Instead, he'd been assessing Harry, not so subtly.

The boy—Theodore—hummed, and Harry understood that he wasn't trying for subtlety, but was unashamed in his scrutiny. "I believe it can be both. Love or power—things people tend to die for in plays—do not necessarily have to be a weakness, but they definitely can be. And dying for such things can constitute a fantasy, but they don't have to."

Harry nodded, once, slowly, going over the words in his head. They hadn't looked away from each other, and he found himself oddly absorbed in their seemingly one on one conversation.

"But then what do you think makes an actor enjoy playing in a tragedy?" he asked. Silence fell and he realised, too late, that he might have spoken out of turn, amongst people who most definitely didn't like him for the time being.

Theodore studied him quickly, his head tilting to the side. He seemed to glance over Harry's shoulder—to Tom, presumably—and a small smile curled on his lips. He hummed. "You're right, my answer doesn't acknowledge the initial question." Harry let out a small breath of

relief. “I think my answer will fall in line with Tom’s though, to a certain degree. I believe we get on stage to leave ourselves behind, if only for a moment, whether that be to play a better or worse version of ourselves, a weaker version or a fanciful version.”

Dumbledore clapped his hands together once and Harry turned, seeing a bright smile on his face. “My! I do think we will have a fabulous year together, boys!” His eyes strayed to Harry who sat up a bit straighter, feeling as if he’d passed some sort of test. “There is no right answer to my question, of course, but you have brought marvellous ideas nonetheless, keep them in mind.”

Harry smiled, allowing himself to sag into the sofa a bit.

— Scene two —

“Come and eat with us,” Theodore said as he walked past Harry to Tom once the lesson was finished. Harry nodded mutely, hiding his surprise at the proposal while trying to inconspicuously shake the pins and needles from his left foot.

He hovered, a bit awkwardly, as he waited for them all to leave the classroom so that he could walk behind. Dumbledore gave him a small encouraging smile as they left the classroom and Harry nodded to him in thanks. The lesson had been great, everything Harry had hoped it would be. Interesting and thoughtful discussions on the nature of plays, tragedies, and acting in general.

The hallways were much more overwhelming with all the students roaming around, and while his classmates seemed quite hostile, Harry was relieved to be with them.

Sitting at a table in the far corner of the large dining hall, that relief was starting to fade as a heavy silence weighed on them. Harry wasn’t naturally a very awkward person but there were *six* of them and it didn’t help that they were all quite handsome and very intimidating, what with their haughty demeanors and closed off features.

“Right, I’m just gonna ask,” one of the boys said. Harry blinked, surprised at his casual words. “How in the fuck did you get in?” he asked, looking straight at him.

Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise. “I don’t even know your names and you expect me to give you my life story?” He regretted the words instantly, reminding himself that he was supposed to be *friendly* and suppress his hot headed retorts. But Harry was an actor at heart, *drama* might as well have been his middle name. As it so happened, it was James, which was synonymous with drama if Harry’s memories of his dad were anything to go by.

Five pairs of eyes looked at him in surprise, studying him as if reassessing something, all except Tom, who was eating and reading a book. He was sitting at the other end of the table, uninterested and blasé. Harry wondered, briefly, if it was an act or if he was genuinely like that.

“Okay,” another one of the boys said with a laugh, “I’m Alphard.” He stuck his hand out in greeting and Harry took it, giving him a smile.

“Richard, but you can call me Rick,” another one said, holding out his hand which Harry took as well. He was the one who had spoken when Harry had introduced himself in the classroom, and the one who had asked how he’d gotten into the school not twenty seconds prior.

Next was Gaspar, and then Abraxas. Alphard was rather pretty, reminding Harry a bit of Sirius; he had black hair, long, that curled a bit at the ends, an aristocratic bone structure, his nose just on that side of crooked, and blue eyes that bordered on grey. Rick was intimidating: tall, broad-shouldered, and short black hair, but he had kind eyes, a soft brown. Gaspar was quite short, much like Harry himself, and had brown hair, naturally unruly but there was

clearly an effort to keep it in check that had been made. His features were kind too, a kind of distant look in his eyes that made Harry think he wasn't really listening to the conversation. Abraxas was very different, long blonde hair, aristocratic features and cold blue eyes.

"And Theodore, right?" Harry asked, looking over at the boy sitting across from Tom.

He nodded, holding his hand out. "You can call me Theo." He was pretty too, dark hair neatly styled, posh bone structure, sharp jawline, he was tall too. He did have a sort of dead eye look, a soft brown though they remained expressionless, and Harry found it just a bit charming. None of them were as handsome as Tom though, who kept drawing Harry's eyes to him like a magnet, raking over his hollowed cheeks, sharp and sinister almost, coupled with the dark smudges under his eyes. He was gaunt, in a sense. Harry couldn't think of a better term to describe him, but it was charming, suited him well, with his pronounced collarbones, visible even through his shirt, and protruding Adam's Apple. He was pointy, just shy of lanky, but he wore it well, everything coming together in the way he held himself.

"And this is Tom," Theo added, as if reading Harry's mind.

He smiled at Tom tentatively but only got a blank look in return, his eyes quickly returning to his book. There was something about him, something that kept drawing Harry in, unable to look away. It drowned out the noise in the cafeteria, the weighty stares of their peers, if only for just a moment. Harry couldn't put his finger on what it was—the mystery of him? His inexpressive and uninterested blank stare, so at odds with the way he'd looked at Harry earlier, full of interest?

"Now tell us," Alphard said eagerly, dragging Harry's stubborn attention away from Tom, "how in the fuck did you get in?"

Harry laughed lightly, feeling a lot more at ease after the introductions despite how overwhelming it all was. They didn't seem that mean (except for Tom maybe), just a bit of a tight knit community. "I er—" he started but shook himself; he was here to be an actor, so he needed to *act*— "I actually couldn't apply when I was twelve, but it had always been my dream to come here." The boys were hanging onto his every word. "I went to various schools growing up, I started doing theatre when I was very young, my parents came here—"

"What're their names?" Abraxas asked curiously.

"Oh," Harry said, having not expected to be cut off. "James Potter and Lily Evans." The boys exchanged glances, recognition evident on their faces. "Anyway," Harry continued quickly, "I technically had the qualifications to get in but, like I said, when I was twelve I couldn't, but I still went to drama school. Then, when I was fifteen I started living part time with my Godfather and it was just this year that he managed to get me an audition, he's er—Sirius Black."

"*Sirius Black?*" Alphard asked incredulously after a beat of stunned silence.

"Er—yeah," Harry said awkwardly. He really hoped they weren't going to say anything awful about Sirius, he could get *very* defensive about him.

“He’s my uncle!” Alphard exclaimed with a disbelieving laugh.

Openly stunned, Harry gawked at him. “No way? Your last name’s Black?”

Alphard nodded proudly. “Yep.”

Harry gasped, remembering. “Of course!” he exclaimed. “Sirius told me all about you! I even thought you looked like him. I can't believe I didn’t make the connection, of course you’d be here!”

Alphard smiled. “How is he? I haven’t seen him in years, my parents don’t let me.”

Harry’s grin faltered imperceptibly. “He’s good,” he said, ignoring the bitter taste in his mouth that reminded him an awful lot of Sirius’s whiskey. “Better, anyway.”

Alphard’s smile remained but his eyebrows were furrowed.

“So he got you in?” Rick asked curiously. “I mean—it’s not surprising, he’s very famous.”

“Another nepotism baby then,” Tom mumbled contemptuously, and Harry’s eyes strayed back to him, curious to know more about him but reluctant to ask.

He shrugged. “He got the school’s attention, my background got me the audition, and my audition got me in.”

“What’s your background?” Abraxas asked.

“Well, I was a child actor for a time,” Harry said, which was true. When his parents had been alive they’d gotten him into acting quite early and he’d been in a few programs and adverts. “Then I had drama classes after school.” Still true, he’d fought tooth and nail to be able to go to extra drama classes on an evening when he lived with the Dursleys. He’d had to get a job on the weekends to be able to go but it was worth it. “And then from thirteen to sixteen I went to the Conservatoire in London.” *Lie*, but it had gotten him in here so he wasn’t going to say that. From the ages of thirteen to sixteen he’d still been at the Dursleys, a brooding and angry teenager in public school. At least in that time he had regular visits to Sirius’s house and he had Ron and Hermione, so it was alright.

Rick whistled and said, “Wow,” drawing out the word.

Gaspar hummed. “What did you study at the Conservatoire? Acting I’m assuming.”

Harry did his absolute best to ignore Tom who was now staring at him with that same intensity from earlier—trying to shake the feeling that he *knew*. “Yeah, acting.”

“So Sirius is paying for your year here?” Alphard asked curiously, unabashed in his indiscretion. Harry didn’t mind.

He shook his head. “No, I came into my inheritance when I turned eighteen, so I’m paying.”

“Why couldn’t you audition when you were twelve?” Theo asked. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

Harry shook his head again. “No, I—the relatives I was living with at the time refused, and then the window of opportunity closed, you know?” He paused before adding, as an afterthought, “And no one would’ve paid for it at that time.”

“Sirius wouldn’t have?” Gaspar asked, no malice behind the inquiry. Not that Harry could tell anyway.

He laughed awkwardly. “He wasn’t really in any place to look after me—at that time anyway.” Gaspar gave him a curious look and Harry laughed again, nervously this time. “He was in rehab,” he clarified.

“Oh,” Gaspar said with wide eyes, only then taking in the looks his friends were sending him. “Sorry—shit, yeah, sorry.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Harry said, waving him off. “It’s something me and him joke about now.” Kind of, they *used* to anyway, before Harry realised that his Godfather might benefit from another trip there.

“Right, I’m done,” Theo said, quite abruptly. “I’m off for a smoke, who’s coming?”

“We have all afternoon off, why are you in a rush for a smoke?” Rick said, getting up anyway. “We get the whole chapel to ourselves this year, let’s wait ‘til we’re settled in there.”

Alphard hummed as he stood up. “We need to start on our auditions too.”

“Let’s all go,” Tom said suddenly, snapping his book shut and standing up. “We need to get our things from the office.”

Harry’s eyes followed his tall and lithe frame as he manoeuvred through the hall, following them all belatedly.

— Scene three —

They got their things from the office, Harry slinging his bag—a leather one that Sirius had given him—over his shoulder. He followed the others outside, unsure of where they were actually going. When Sirius spoke of the school he got very animated, telling seven different stories at the same time, so Harry didn't have a *huge* grasp on how things worked.

They walked across the grounds of the castle, past the massive lake and the students sitting around it, along a dense forest, before they arrived in front of a small building. It was very quaint and Harry realised why Rick had called it a chapel earlier, because it *literally was*. Or was in the past, anyway. When Tom turned the key in the lock and opened the door, it gave way to an open space, a huge library of sorts, with a very large table in the centre of all the books, some sofas strewn around, lamps adorning the walls, and what looked like a small kitchen through an archway beyond another doorway.

Harry peeked up as he walked across the threshold, seeing bannisters circling around the library space on the first floor, he could see doors on that landing and assumed those were the bedrooms. Light poured into the room through ancient looking stained glass, giving the building an ethereal sort of look from inside. Despite that, it was homely; the smell of books permeated the air, along with the distinct smell of cleanliness. The bookshelves were tall and packed, looming menacingly over the space, but it wasn't claustrophobic, quite the contrary, more like a comforting clutter.

"There are four bedrooms," Tom announced, holding a piece of paper and closing the door behind them. "All doubles with two single beds and two desks in each, that means that one of us can have a room alone. Obviously, I want it."

Instead of the snickers that Harry expected at the statement, Tom was only met with approving nods which he seemed satisfied with. This odd little interaction perplexed him greatly, unsure of what kind of role Tom played amongst them.

"I'm fine rooming with someone," Rick said amiably.

"I'll go with you," Gaspar replied with a smile.

"I don't care who I'm with," Theo said with a shrug, looking over at the rest of them.

"I'll come with you," Abraxas said with a shrug of his own.

Alphard turned to Harry with a smile. "You don't mind rooming with me, do you?"

"Of course not," Harry replied happily. He had shared with the spiders under the stairs in his youth, he'd be fine with Alphard and his kind smiles.

"Fine," Tom cut in, his tone cold. "Take your pick of the rooms."

"We'll meet back down for a smoke in twenty minutes, right lads?" Theo asked as he walked up the stairs.

“We’ll be there,” Alphard replied, motioning for Harry to follow him. Once on the first floor everyone started disappearing through various doors, and Harry and Alphard ended up with the one next to Tom’s while the others were on the other side of the landing.

Harry took in the room as they closed the door behind them. A blue fluffy carpet under their feet, different from the hallway’s wooden floor, small single beds with chequered bedsheets, a large window between their beds, two large wardrobes on either side of the door and two desks at the foot of their beds.

“Well, this is cosy,” Alphard said with a scrunched up nose.

Harry laughed lightly. “Were you expecting something more luxurious?”

Alphard hummed. “I suppose the library makes up for it, it’s better than the dorm we had to share before. There were eight of us in one room.”

“Oh, yeah,” Harry said vaguely, putting his bag down. “Sirius told me you get cut every year, right?”

Alphard nodded gravely. “It’s brutal, you’re very lucky that you didn’t have to go through that.”

“Yeah, I suppose it is a bit unfair,” Harry said, actually thinking about it for the first time. Maybe he understood why the others didn’t seem to like him that much.

Alphard shrugged. “The professors will probably be highly critical of you because of the advantage you’ve had, so fair warning. Although, you seem to be handling it well so far.”

“What d’you mean?” Harry asked curiously, taking his clothes out of his bag, like Alphard was doing, and hanging them up.

“Dumbledore was mean to ask you a question like that during your first lesson with us, especially after Tom had answered it initially—you did well though,” he explained. “Sorry for going against what you said by the way, it was a very weird situation to be in.”

“Oh,” Harry said faintly. “No, no problem. Everyone’s entitled to different opinions anyway, and like he said, there was no right answer.” He got his books out and set them on his desk, many tomes, novels, and plays alike. He’d always loved reading—especially when he could reenact the scenes and dialogue. He glanced at the wall his bed was pressed against, it was the wall he shared with Tom’s room.

“How come you were so late anyway?” Alphard asked, pulling Harry out of his head.

He turned to look back at him, the night’s events playing in the forefront of his mind. “Oh, Sirius drove me. We had a few setbacks.”

“All the way from London?” Alphard asked, surprise written all over his face.

Harry nodded. “We were going to get an inn around here for the night, drive yesterday, you know, but again, we had a bit of a setback.”

“Oh,” Alphard said faintly.

Harry could see that he was dying to ask more but he didn’t, and Harry was grateful. He didn’t fancy going into detail about how he’d woken up the day prior with Sirius knocked out on their sofa, completely out of it. He’d been very apologetic though, promising to drive him in the evening once he’d sobered up, and he held true to his promise. Harry supposed he could have driven himself, but Sirius had been so excited about taking him to school that he couldn’t bring himself to leave on his own, it had felt wrong.

“Have you *slept*?” Alphard asked suddenly.

Harry laughed, scratching at his head. “A bit in the car, not much though.” Between Sirius shouting and swearing loudly at any other car that had dared be in their general vicinity and his loud music, it hadn’t been an easy task.

Once they’d finished putting their things away, stuffing their empty bags under their beds, they left their room and found Theo and Abraxas already sitting around the large table, drinks in front of them, Theo rolling a joint.

“Perfect timing, boys,” Theo said lightly, licking across the rolling paper and sticking it down.

Harry looked around curiously as he took his seat. “Is it okay to smoke in here?”

Theo huffed out a laugh, tapping the joint on the table. “Yeah, it’s fine. Seventh year theatre students get to do what they want really.”

Abraxas hummed, handing Theo a lighter. “We are the most in number at the beginning of the school years but the least at the end, we get special privileges, like private accommodation.”

“So you’re the best of the best,” Harry said with a smile, tapping his fingers on the table.

“I suppose,” Theo replied with a shrug.

“Don’t be modest, Theo.”

Harry looked up sharply, catching sight of Tom leaning against the bannister and looking down at them.

“Fine,” Theo said with a laugh, coughing on the smoke. “We are the best of the best,” he said, looking back at Harry who smiled again.

He was uncomfortably aware of Tom moving down the stairs and appearing back in the open space. He made Harry feel on edge, like he needed to walk on eggshells. He took a seat across from Harry, beside Theo, and Harry felt unbearably cursed and lucky at the same time.

“What are we drinking?” Tom asked, taking the bottle sat on the end of the table. “Fetch me a glass, Abraxas.” Harry was once again perplexed to see Abraxas get up and get a glass without further question, obeying to Tom as if it were normal.

“Can you grab us some too please, Abraxas?” Alphard called back. “You’ll have some won’t you, Harry?”

Harry turned to look at him, in the chair beside him. “Yeah,” he said distractedly, looking back at the bottle. From what he could tell it wasn’t Sirius’s brand so it was fine. He watched as Theo handed Tom the joint, watched him bring it to his lips and inhale elegantly, looking unfairly attractive with smoke billowing out from his parted lips.

“This is the worst thing you’ve ever rolled,” Tom commented, sending a pointed look Theo’s way.

Harry was relieved to see Theo scoff, instead of bowing his head in deference like he’d half expected. “Someone else roll then, we need another ‘cause God knows Tom’s not gonna let that go,” he said.

Harry bit back an amused smile, watching Tom scowl as he pulled on the joint again before passing it on pointedly.

“Here Harry, can you roll?” Theo asked, handing him the stuff. “These two can’t and Tom will refuse to, too scared to fuck it up after having a go at me.”

Harry grinned. “Yeah, ‘course.”

“Tell me stop, Harry,” Abraxas said as he poured some whiskey into a glass. Harry did, letting him get a few measures in while he pulled a sheet of paper out and rolled a piece of cardboard up. He tried not to think of what Hermione would have to say if she could see him at that moment. Although, she had been known to have a bit of fun sometimes, even if she’d never let Harry teach her how to roll a joint, too embarrassed after her first catastrophic attempt.

“Cheers,” Harry said as Abraxas pushed the glass his way. He was lost in thought as he rolled the joint, licking a cigarette Theo had handed him to rip the paper and get the tobacco out, thinking about all the times he and Ron had done so behind the school. He thought of how it was Sirius who had taught him how to roll a joint under the disapproving eyes of Remus who ended up interrupting them to teach Harry *properly* which had made them all laugh.

He was so lost in thought he didn’t realise until much too late that he was infringing on the number one rule of rolling a joint; never look at someone directly when you’re licking the paper. He snapped out of it when he realised his eyes were locked with Tom’s who was staring at him with that same intensity again. It was too late to back out though so Harry had to commit to licking the length of the paper while in some strange staring match. He could feel the heat creeping up his cheeks and it was wholly embarrassing.

He cleared his throat when he’d finished sticking the paper down, taking a quick drink of the whiskey as he packed the joint.

Tom held his hand out across the table with an expectant look and Harry frowned. “Roller gets first light,” he said unthinkingly, so used to having to say the same thing to Seamus when he smoked with him and Ron.

Tom's eyebrows rose and silence fell around the table. Harry wasn't sure what to do, wasn't sure any of them knew what to do in such a situation.

Theo broke the silence, chuckling lightly. He reached over the table and handed Harry the lighter. "He's right you know," he said, looking at Tom who took his hand back belatedly.

Biting back a smirk, Harry lit the joint.

"Where're Rick and Gaspar?" Alphard asked, sucking on his teeth as he set his glass back on the table, chasing away the bitterness.

Theo snorted. "Fucking probably."

"They're together?" Harry asked, tongue loosened by the drink and the weed.

Theo laughed again. "No, Rick's into girls only but he and Gaspar have definitely kissed before."

"Stop telling people we've kissed!" Gaspar exclaimed as he appeared down the staircase. "We just couldn't decide who got which bed, that's why we're late."

"You did though!" Theo shouted back, just as loudly, turning in his chair to look at Gaspar. "I caught you two snogging in fifth year."

"We were really drunk," Rick said solemnly, looking at Harry as he took a glass and poured some whiskey into it.

"You're hoarding the joint," Tom said with a look, capturing Harry's attention again.

Harry huffed, taking one last drag. Tom held his hand out, visibly trying to keep his face impassive. Harry hesitated, wanting to see how far he could push Tom but decided it wasn't the time, leaning forward in his seat to hand it to him. Their fingers brushed and Tom smirked, staring into Harry's eyes as he brought it to his mouth.

Harry's mouth felt dry—from the smoke or something else he had no idea—and he was quick to pick his glass up, trying not to think about how Tom had something in his mouth that had been in his.

"What are you guys doing for the audition?" Alphard asked.

Theo hummed in thought. "I was thinking about doing something from *Pericles*."

Rick nodded and Harry followed the motion curiously. "You do him well." Theo dipped his head in thanks.

The others gave their ideas, reciting some of the first lines of their choices in a funny voice that made Harry laugh.

"What about you, Harry?" Alphard asked.

He hummed, taking the joint that was being handed to him by Abraxas. “This is for the play in December, right? I’m a bit mixed up, I’m not entirely sure what the year’s schedule is,” he confessed.

“Sirius didn’t explain anything to you?” Alphard said, sounding surprised.

Harry tilted his head back and forth. “I—He *did*, it’s just when Sirius gets going he doesn’t always make much sense, he gets wrapped up in a million stories and anecdotes and I can never bring myself to cut him off, so yeah.” He took a drag of the joint to keep his hands busy.

“Okay, well, brace yourself,” Theo said after a short silence, sitting up straighter, and Harry listened attentively. “The seventh year plays are the most important—*everyone* attends, the whole school, parents, and school sponsors. The first one we do is *Macbeth* on Halloween, right?” Harry nodded. “But we don’t do the full play, it’s more a bit of fun than anything else, only students and faculty come to watch.”

“What do you mean we don’t do the full play?” Harry asked curiously, passing the joint to Tom absentmindedly when he noticed Alphard already had one.

“Bits and pieces are selected, some characters are cut,” Theo continued, speaking with his hands as much as his mouth. “Like I said it’s just a bit of fun, so we should get some envelopes in our letterboxes at the beginning of next week with the character we’ll be playing and the scenes we’ll be doing with a place and a time, but, most importantly, *we cannot tell anyone who we’re playing*.”

“You’re kidding?” Harry said with wide eyes, excited at the prospect. “That’s so cool, but I bet it makes fuck ups common, right?”

“Sometimes,” Rick replied with a head tilt. “There have been some over the years but it’s really not long—an hour at most, you just have to remember your lines and cues and have fun with it mainly.”

“Right,” Harry nodded. “Okay—and that’s the first one, right, what’s next?”

Theo sighed. “Next is what we’re officially auditioning for Wednesday—the December play.”

“The dreaded,” Gaspar said, exhaling smoke.

Theo hummed. “As soon as Wednesday we’ll know what the play actually is and who we’re playing, and for this one it’s a full production, repetitions all that—nothing like for *Macbeth*.” Harry nodded in understanding. “We do the entire play and our performance in this play is a main factor in determining whether we graduate or not.”

“Okay,” Harry said, a hint of unease seeping into his bones. “So in four months we have to prepare an entire play, while also learning our lines secretly for *Macbeth*?”

“Correct,” Theo said with a nod. “It’s a lot of work and we’ll be rehearsing until late most nights but we don’t have many lessons so we do have a lot of spare time.”

“Okay, what’s the rest of the year? It’s the big seventh year project, innit? Sirius said something about a comedy but he was laughing a lot while he explained it to me,” Harry said, tapping on his glass.

“Yeah, that would be the play the seventh years have to write and produce—from scratch, all together,” Theo said, scratching at his arm as if he were already stressed.

“Really? Wow,” Harry replied, his mind whirling with possibilities.

“It’s like the big thing about this school,” Abraxas added. “That’s really what will make or break our careers; writing, directing, playing in, anything and everything—done entirely by us.”

“We have full creative freedom,” Theo continued. “We can do whatever we want, ‘employ’ as many students from other departments as we want, hold auditions for background roles—and our professors have *no idea* what we’re doing until the grand night.”

“That’s…*incredible*,” Harry breathed out, excited beyond belief. This was everything he’d hoped for and more. “Honestly I’m more worried about the December play than anything else,” he said when he got incredulous looks all around, except Tom who was staring blankly.

Alphard laughed next to him. “I suppose the December play is a bit more daunting—it all depends on which one we land on.”

“What kind usually get picked? Greek, Shakespeare, French…?”

“Shakespeare mainly,” Gaspar said, twirling a strand of hair around his finger. “Although they pick Greek sometimes, we had *Oedipus Rex* a few years ago.”

“If we get *Romeo and Juliet* I’m killing myself,” Theo said dramatically, and they all laughed.

“They wouldn’t pick that for us, we’re all blokes,” Rick commented idly.

“Do they not have boys play girl roles? Or vice versa?” Harry asked, leaning onto the table a bit to look at him.

“No we do sometimes, but I doubt they’d give us that play.”

“All we know is that it’ll be a tragedy and will most likely be Shakespeare,” Gaspar said with a shrug.

“So, what’re you auditioning with, Harry?” Alphard asked again.

Harry bit at the nail of his thumb, humming in thought. “I was planning on doing Camille’s monologue from *Horace*, Act IV, Scene four.”

“How unconventional,” Theo said, looking surprised.

“Do you have it?” Gaspar asked eagerly. “I don’t know which one you mean.”

“Yeah, ‘course,” Harry said, getting up. “English or French?”

“Grab them both Harry if you have them, I like to compare,” Alphard called back as Harry started up the stairs.

“You’re such a dork,” Rick teased.

Harry got back with both copies and opened them to the right page, breaking the spines further to get them to stay open. Tom looked vaguely horrified and Harry bit back a grin.

“It’s much prettier in French but I’ll do it in English, my French is shit,” he commented as he sat back down, letting the other boys crowd around the books. Only Tom didn’t hover over anyone’s shoulders to read, looking disinterested.

“Oh, I agree, the French is much nicer, but probably because it’s the original text,” Alphard said after he’d finished.

Harry hummed in agreement. “Sirius does it beautifully.” It was true, Sirius was a brilliant actor, very emotional, and the French always rolled off his tongue almost *too* naturally.

“It’s a very poignant part in the play,” Abraxas commented. “That’s difficult to convey when you haven’t had the buildup.”

Harry shrugged, biting at his nail again. “Should be fine.”

“Well, I can’t wait,” Theo said happily. “Harry’ll go just before Tom too.”

“Do we watch everyone’s auditions?” Harry asked casually. He didn’t particularly mind people being there, the embarrassment had died down years ago.

“Yeah, don’t worry, we’re a very non judgemental audience,” Rick said with a smile.

“Oh, I’m not worried,” Harry said happily enough. While he was a bit awkward in general, once he was on stage he was usually quite confident, despite the pre-performance nerves.

“What did you do for your admittance audition, out of curiosity?” Theo asked.

“Antigone,” Harry replied easily. “Her final speech.”

Theo passed an appraising look over him and nodded. “Unconventional,” he replied with a small smile. Harry did not miss Tom’s staring out of the corner of his eyes, his elegant fingers tapping on the table. “Roll another one, will you, seeing as though no one complained about yours,” he added with a sideways look at Tom, handing Harry the stuff. “And then we’ll crack down on our auditions.”

Harry laughed lightly, taking another sip of his drink before setting to rolling up. He did not make the mistake of looking directly at anyone again, staring intently at the table the whole time and listening to the other boys' chatter. He had to bite back a curious smile though when he saw Tom pick up his copy of *Horace*, in English, reading over Act IV, Scene four quickly.

They dissolved into silence as the afternoon wore on, some of them taking up a sofa or an armchair with a copy of whatever book they needed in their hands, annotating and mumbling under their breaths. Harry knew his speech—had known it for years—and ended up getting up from the table and wandering through the library shelves at the back of the chapel, murmuring his lines under his breath.

The first rays of the setting sun were starting to creep through the stained glass window and it made for a very aesthetically pleasing and relaxing environment, the smell of books and lingering smoke permeating the air.

He came across a copy of *Macbeth* and slid it off the shelf, resolving to read it again before the roles were assigned. He flicked through the book, turning to look back at the open space, for whatever reason, and caught Tom staring at him from his spot at the table that, much like Harry, he hadn't moved from.

Harry's breath stuttered and he looked away quickly, unsure of why it was he who felt caught out when it was clear that it was Tom who had been staring. He was uncomfortably assaulted by the image of Oliver Wood, a boy who had gone to Harry's school when he was fifteen. Oliver had been new and they'd spent the whole first day glancing at each other, as if sizing one another up. It had ended with them snogging behind the school bike shed, hands shoved unceremoniously down each other's pants.

He was kind of hoping the sizing up he and Tom were seemingly doing would end the same way. He shook the thought from his mind, blaming it entirely on the whiskey, and returned to the table, careful not to look directly at Tom again. He lit a cigarette from a pack Sirius had given him, just to do something with his hands.

"You know what?" Theo said suddenly from where he was sprawled on one of the sofas. His eyes were droopy and he looked a bit out of it. "I'd kill someone for a chinese takeaway right now."

Harry laughed, surprised. "Me too actually," he said, realising very suddenly that he was starving.

"Theo, when have you ever eaten a chinese takeaway?" Tom asked incredulously.

Theo got up, swaying on his feet just a bit and blinking rapidly, slumping in his chair from earlier. "Last year when you auditioned for the seventh year play and got so high after that you caved and ordered from the village and demolished the whole fucking thing," he said with a laugh.

Tom gawked at him, mouth moving wordlessy. His eyes looked a bit red too and Harry laughed again. He realised quite suddenly that he'd been silent for hours on end, the giggles he usually got from being high hitting him abruptly.

He couldn't stop giggling stupidly and it caught to Theo who started laughing too, Gaspar and Alphard being quick to follow suit.

"Sorry," Harry gasped out. "I get really giggly when I'm high," he said around his hiccups of laughter. The explanation only made the other boys laugh harder, all except Tom who looked distinctly miffed. "I'm not laughing at you," Harry said quickly, "I promise." He raised his hands in surrender, trying to bite back his laughter. Tom frowned at him and the small pinch to his eyebrows was quite adorable and Harry snorted, very inelegantly, and Theo actually fell to the floor under the force of his laughter.

It lasted…a while. Harry tried his best to get it under wraps because Tom was positively *not* laughing and Harry was starting to feel a bit bad. Once they'd all calmed down, after four relapses in which they made the mistake of looking at each other, Harry breathed shakily.

"Sorry," he repeated, looking at Tom who was still frowning in his direction. "I really wasn't laughing at you, it's just 'cause I'd been quiet for so long, the laughter kind of built up."

"Whatever," Tom said after a couple seconds of just staring at him.

"Right," Theo said, clearing his throat. "Are we getting a takeaway or what? I'm starving."

"Maybe there's a card with a phone number," Gaspar proposed. "There *is* a phone on the wall."

Theo hummed and got up, heading into the kitchen and looking under random things. Harry shook his head and got up to help, finding the leaflets in a matter of seconds.

"Magic," Theo breathed out, as if Harry had done something extraordinary. "How did you find it so fast?"

Harry laughed. "You just have to know where to look. Come on, what does everyone want?"

They passed the leaflet around and jotted down what everyone wanted, Harry having to explain what every dish meant because Tom refused to.

"I actually worked at a takeaway for a while when I was fourteen," Harry commented idly.

"You've had a *job* before?" Alphard asked, surprised.

Harry blinked. "Yeah, like, five actually."

"Wait—weren't you at the Conservatoire when you were fourteen?" Gaspar asked.

"It was in the summer that I had the job," Harry said quickly.

"He'll be here in half an hour," Rick announced as he came back from the hallway where the phone was.

As Theo complained about being starving and Tom took out a cigarette, Harry found himself mirroring him unconsciously, taking one out for himself. The takeaway arrived quickly

enough as they all chatted companionably. However, when they ate, silence reigned again as they absolutely demolished everything they'd ordered in one of the worst cases of the munchies Harry had ever had. Almost to the extent of the time he and Ron had eaten butter straight from the tub after getting astronomically high—it was a low point in their lives that they'd agreed to keep to themselves.

"That hit the spot," Theo said with a sigh once they'd finished, echoed by a general hum of agreement.

They each returned to their own occupations after they'd cleaned up. Abraxas and Alphard went straight to bed, Gaspar went to the piano tucked in a corner behind a bookshelf, just below the stained glass window, and played for a while which was really nice, Harry made sure to compliment his skills when he stopped. Rick had slumped on a sofa to listen to the music but they both went up to bed soon after.

Harry had kept the copy of *Macbeth* and was thumbing the pages idly, biting at his thumb as he read absentmindedly. When it was just him, Theo, and Tom left, Theo rolled another joint. Harry only realised they were smoking when Theo passed it to him.

"D'you want the end?" Harry asked, voice hoarse and eyes heavy as he tilted the end of the joint in Tom's direction. Theo was nodding off in his chair.

Tom looked up from his book and took the joint wordlessly. They went back to being silent, both engrossed in their reading.

"Theo," Tom said after a while, his own voice a bit rough. "Theo go to bed."

"Hm?" Theo hummed in question, somehow having managed to curl up on his chair.

Tom pinched his arm. "Go to bed."

Theo grumbled something before cracking his eyes open minutely and stumbling to his feet, his limbs seeming heavy. "Fine," he huffed. "Night."

"Night, Theo," Harry said with a smile while Tom just hummed.

Harry returned to his book though he realised he was struggling to comprehend any of the words, his mind wandering off, settling on the fact that he and Tom were alone. Distracted, he pretended to read for a few minutes, resolving to just get up and go to bed if Tom didn't say anything.

Eventually, Tom tapped his fingers on the table and Harry looked up reflexively, trying not to react when their eyes met, his stare as intense as ever.

When he didn't say anything, Harry gathered his senses and said, "Yeah?" hoping to prompt him into speech.

Tom frowned lightly, his expression pinched. "We aren't friends," he stated, and Harry frowned in turn, "and we never will be. It may be enough for my classmates that you have a

famous Godfather and previously famous parents but it isn't for me. You don't deserve your place amongst us."

Harry blinked, somewhat thrown by the conversation. "Alright," he ended up saying, a bit stupidly.

Tom just got up and left, heading upstairs without another word. Harry set his book down once he'd definitely disappeared and sighed, unwilling to acknowledge the twisting in his stomach that made him feel a bit sick, the corners of his eyes prickling.

It was cockney. Tom had a cockney accent, he realised after a few minutes of sitting alone, in silence. The thought was no consolation. He went to bed, hoping sleep would settle his nerves.

— Scene four —

Harry tried not to dwell on what Tom had said on Monday evening, consoling himself with the fact that the other boys had taken a liking to him. They got on well and Harry felt at ease with them, especially with Alphard with whom he'd struck up a quick friendship.

He and Tom ignored each other for the most part, although Harry often felt eyes on him, even catching Tom in the act of staring more than once. By Tuesday evening he'd gotten used to it and even frowned in his direction when he caught him, yet again. Tom hadn't seemed taken aback per se, but for once it was him who dropped his gaze.

It was a shame because they would have to work together in writing and directing a play come January, but Harry wasn't going to try and win his favour. If Tom wanted to be a tosser he could be, Harry wouldn't stop him. He would remain perfectly civil, even *nice* if the situation called for it, but he wouldn't scamper after Tom like a lost puppy in search of his friendship. He could go and fuck himself for all Harry cared—even though he wouldn't have minded if Tom had chosen to take the route of fucking *him* instead. Though Harry tried not to think about that too much. It was just like him to be attracted to someone like Tom, he thought bitterly.

Tuesday had been spent in Dumbledore's classroom again where they discussed tragedies yet again, going over the character archetypes. The Professor made sure they all had their auditions ready for the next day too, giving them a time to regroup in the school's theatre. They had to be there at nine o'clock sharp, they were the first to go, the sixth years and any others auditioning for the secondary roles going after them.

"Are you nervous?" Alphard asked as they got dressed on Wednesday morning.

Harry shimmied into a pair of fancy black trousers, gifted to him by Sirius. "I suppose," he said with a shrug. "I'm always a bit nervous before I get on stage."

"Me too," Alphard said, looking over at him with a smile as he pulled on his own shirt.

Theo appeared in their doorway, combing through his hair roughly, his hands jittery. "Are you two ready?" he asked. "We have to go."

"Yeah we're ready," Harry replied, buttoning his shirt up. It was black, the material almost translucent, reminiscent of a veil to encapsulate Camille's grief.

"You look nice," Theo commented, hovering in the doorway after doing a double take. He walked into the room and felt the material of Harry's shirt, checking him over.

"Thanks," Harry said with a smile. He wasn't one to be fussy about how he dressed but he knew that it was important to look your best for auditions, wear an outfit as if it were a costume. He laughed lightly as Theo made him turn, smoothing the shirt down his back.

"Am I interrupting?" Tom asked, appearing in the doorway, his voice cold.

“No,” Theo said absentmindedly, hooking his fingers in Harry’s waistband and adjusting his trousers. Harry tried not to blush, unused to anyone being so casually handsy. “I’d be inclined to try and smooth your hair out but it suits you,” he added, stepping back and eyeing him quickly before reaching out and touching his hair, twirling a few strands between his fingers to bring the curls out.

“It looks awful brushed anyway,” Harry said. “I mean it looks awful as is, but it looks even *worse* if I even try to get it to look nice.”

Theo hummed, a smile on his lips. “Nah, it looks nice as is, like I said, it suits you.”

“I agree,” Alphard commented. “It would look weird if it were tame.”

Harry flashed him a smile, his eyes inadvertently straying over to Tom who was already staring at him. Though, for once, their eyes didn’t catch, because Tom was staring at Harry’s shirt, his eyes raking the length of his body. Harry tried not to fidget, looking back at Theo who was still fiddling with his hair.

“If you’re *finished*,” Tom snapped, a bitterness to his words that was nothing short of confusing. Harry glanced back at him, taken aback by the glare he was directing at Theo.

“Yes,” Theo huffed, letting Harry go. “Come on then.”

They met with the others downstairs and set off for the castle. The theatre was in the basement, sort of. It was a *huge* space with a stage at the forefront of it, adorned with balconies and seats lining the whole room. It was an imposing place with no natural light, only the lights fixed to the walls and on the floor of the stage lighting it up in an orange glow.

“Ah! Boys!” Dumbledore exclaimed as they walked through the massive door. “Wonderful to see you.”

He was sitting at a desk in front of the stage with two other teachers that Harry had yet to meet. One was a middle aged woman who looked severe and the other a man, about Sirius’s age with black hair that hung like curtains around his face. He looked displeased at best, though he seemed oddly familiar.

“Good morning,” Tom said pleasantly, the rest of them echoing the greeting.

“That’s it, take your seats boys, sit alphabetically to make things easier,” Dumbledore instructed with a smile. Harry ended up sitting between Theo and Tom which was an odd experience. Gaspar was called up first and Harry realised that he was a lot more nervous than he’d anticipated. His stomach squirmed uncomfortably and his hands felt sweaty.

Gaspar was good, reciting his lines impeccably, a melodious lilt to his voice that drew Harry into the speech completely. They clapped politely when he’d finished, and Harry found himself mirroring Gaspar’s bright grin.

Alphard was next, looking nervous as he walked up to the stage, but he ended up doing very well, his expressions and gestures matching the words he was speaking perfectly. He

commandeered the stage, captivating with his aristocratic features. Harry was very impressed. They clapped for him too and Harry shot him a thumbs up that made him grin.

Rick was *impressive*, his presence on the stage was overwhelming. He'd chosen a very vehement monologue from *Richard III* by Shakespeare and Harry couldn't help but think he'd chosen perfectly, embodying the character incredibly well. His voice was loud, powerful. Harry applauded happily when he'd finished, amazed at how truly talented his peers were so far. They were on a completely different level to those with whom Harry had taken theatre classes. He just hoped he was as good as them.

Abraxas stood up to the stage as if he owned it and delivered his speech perfectly, enunciating every word, his voice loud and clear in the space. The words were scathing when they needed to be and softer when the speech demanded it. Like Alphard, he could use his features to his advantage, looking down his nose at the audience. Harry clapped when he'd finished, thoroughly impressed.

"Good luck," Harry said as Theo shimmied past him and Tom to get to the main aisle.

Theo smiled at him appreciatively before making his way to the stage. Harry was uncomfortably aware of it being his turn next and his heart beat erratically in his chest.

Theo was incredible. He did *Pericles* as he said he would and he embodied the role perfectly. His words rolled off his tongue in an almost bored tone at times, but he still filled the words with life, speaking them as if they were his own. Harry clapped but in a distracted way, his stomach twisting in knots.

He stood up mechanically when he was called, shimmying past Tom who made no effort to make room for him which ended in their knees knocking together. Harry tried not to think about it, walking down the aisle and up to the stage.

"Good luck," Theo whispered as they crossed paths and Harry smiled, managing to take a deep breath.

He climbed the steps and stood on the stage, waiting for Dumbledore to address him as he'd done the others, trying not to fidget.

"What do you have for us, Harry?" he asked, a kind smile on his face.

"Camille's monologue in *Horace*, Act IV, Scene four, sir," Harry replied with a smile, feeling his nerves settle a bit. His voice wasn't shaking which was a good thing.

"Brilliant, whenever you're ready, though please do remind us of the context in which this scene takes place," Dumbledore said curiously, righting his half moon glasses on his nose.

Harry nodded. "In the previous scene Camille's father informs her that her remaining brother, the two others having died previously, is to fight to the death with her fiancé. She is actively grieving her two late brothers and must now deal with the impending grief of losing her last brother or the man she loves. She is angry at her father because he tells her that her pain is less than it is, diminishing it."

“Very well,” Dumbledore said with a smile. “Go ahead.”

Harry took a quick breath and licked over his lips. The theatre was deathly silent.

Harry (CAMILLE) :

“Yes, by assured signs I'le make him see
That vertuous Love can baffle Destiny;
Nor yet those tyr'nnous cruel laws obeys
Our froward Stars seat in a Parents place.
Unpitying Father! on so just a score
Thou call'st my sorrows womanish and poor:
But I the more it does afflict thee, will
Dote on his memory, more lament him still,
And make that sorrow thou condemn'st to rise
Equal to fortunes direct cruelties.
Did ever fortune in a few hours space,
So often vary her inconstant face!
So often kind, and cruel, good, and ill!
And strook so often e're she strook to kill?
Was ever soul that in one day did bear
Such turns of joy, and grief, of hope, and fear?
A soul subjected unto more events,
And bandied so with various accidents:
An Oracle, a Dream, a Battel, Peace;
By turns assure, astonish, fright, appease.
My Nuptials are prepar'd, and straight my Love
Against my Brothers Arms, his Arms must prove:
Both Camps abhor the choice, and stay their rage,
Whom the unpitying Gods again engage.
Rome seems o'recome, and *Curiace*'s hand
From blood of mine alone remains unstain'd.
Was not my grief (ye Powers) then too small,
For *Rome*'s misfortune, and my Brothers fall?
Did not my hopes flatter my innocence,
When I thought still to love him no offence?
His death has paid me home for't, and to that,
The cruel way of telling me his fate.
His Rival brings the news, and to my face
Repeats the hateful truth of his disgrace.
Apparent joy doth on his forehead sit,
Pleas'd with my loss more than *Romes* benefit;
Whilst building aiery hopes in his vain head,
He, with my Brother, triumphs o're the dead.
But this is nothing still to what's behind,
On this occasion I am joy enjoyn'd.
I must applaud the Conqueror's desert,
And kiss th' inhumane hand that gores my heart.

It is in such a deplorable case
A crime to weep, and but to sigh disgrace.
Their brutish vertue in this shock of fate,
Will have me fancy my self fortunate.
It is it seems a rule the vertuous have,
We must be barb'rous e're we can be brave.
Degenerate then my heart, let us disclaim
This Father's Vertue, and this Brother's Fame.
'Tis honourable to be counted base,
Where Vertue rises by such brutish ways.
Break out my griefs, 'tis fruitless to forbear!
When all's once lost, what have we left to fear?
Let us this bloody Conqueror despise,
And far from shunning him confront his eyes;
Reproach his Victory, provoke his Spleen,
And please your selves, by your displeasing him,
See where he comes, now let us bravely show
What to a Lover's death, chaste Lovers owe."

As always, once he started, he was entirely at ease, the words flowing easily off his tongue and his body moving only when needed, only when he wanted to mark the words with a gesture. He got through the speech easily, the only time he almost faltered being on the last line. He'd glanced at the audience, only the stage lights were on, there were no spotlights, and so Harry could see the people in the theatre clearly. Tom was sitting forward in his seat, his eyes boring into Harry intensely, and he'd *almost* stuttered on the word *'lover,'* much to his embarrassment. He'd caught himself though, looking away quickly and finishing the speech unscathed.

It was silent for a couple seconds when he finished and he worried he'd been awful. He needn't have worried though, the Professors and his classmates applauded kindly and Harry smiled, a grin stretching across his face in time with a warm flush.

"Thank you, Harry," Dumbledore said as he stopped clapping, a smile on his face.

Harry nodded, feeling breathless, and was quick to climb down the stage. He passed Tom on his way back who stared at him intently, a calculating glint to his eyes.

"That was incredible!" Theo whispered with a grin as Harry sat back down beside him.

"Thank you," Harry whispered back. "You were brilliant."

Theo smiled at him, reaching out and squeezing his arm gently before looking back to the stage. Tom had just announced that he'd be doing one of Hernani's monologues from Victor Hugo's *Hernani*. Harry didn't miss the way his classmates all looked at each other in question.

Act III, Scene three
Tom (HERNANI):

“Mountains of old Aragon !
Galicia Estremadura !
Unto all who come
Around me I bring misery ! Your sons,
The best, without remorse I've ta'en to fight,
And now behold them dead ! The bravest brave
Of all Spain's sons lie, soldier-like, upon
The hills, their backs to earth, the living God
Before; and if their eyes could ope they'd look
On heaven's blue. See what I do to all
Who join me ! Is it fortune any one
Should covet ? Doña Sol, oh ! take the Duke,
Take hell, or take the King—all would be well.
All must be better than myself, I say
No longer have I friend to think of me,
And it is full time that thy turn comes.
For I must be alone. Fly from me then,
From my contagion. Make not faithful love
A duty of religion ! Fly from me.
For pity's sake, Thou think'st me, perhaps, a man
Like others, one with sense, who knows the end
At which he aims, and acts accordingly.
Oh, undeceive thyself. I am a force
That cannot be resisted—agent blind
And deaf of mournful mysteries ! A soul
Of misery made of gloom. Where shall I go?
I cannot tell. But I am urged, compelled
By an impetuous breath and wild decree ;
I fall, and fall, and cannot stop descent.
If sometimes breathless I dare turn my head,
A voice cries out, "Go on ! " and the abyss
Is deep, and to the depths I see it red
With flame or blood ! Around my fearful course
All things break up—all die. Woe be to them
Who touch me. Fly, I say ! Turn thee away
From my so fatal path. Alas ! without
Intending I should do thee ill.”

Tom was…unreal. He was beautiful, for a start, made for the stage—or the stage was made for him, Harry couldn’t decide. He was hypnotic, emotional in a way he just wasn’t—from what Harry had seen so far, anyway. He hung onto his every word, entranced by his performance. There were a couple seconds where he didn’t even realise Tom had finished, too busy staring at him with wide eyes. When he realised though he clapped, as did the others, very enthusiastically.

Dumbledore thanked him for his performance and frankly Harry wanted to thank him too. Once the thrill of admiration had passed though, he was left with a gaping hole of self-doubt

carving itself into his chest. He went over Tom's words from Monday night and had to wonder : *do I deserve to be here*?

All these boys were incredibly talented and they clearly knew it. Harry knew he was good but could he really claim to be as good as them? Tom was evidently the best of them all and to have *him* tell Harry he didn't deserve to be here, it sparked worry all throughout him.

— Scene five —

Harry's worry clung to him even as they left the theatre and returned to the chapel. Dumbledore had dismissed them, handing them an envelope to read once they were back in their accommodation. The other boys seemed to think it would have the name of the play on it and Harry could only smile in confusion at the dramatics. *Really*, he thought, *a secret envelope just to give us the title of the play?*

"Right, who's opening it?" Theo asked, eyeing the envelope as if he didn't trust it. They were sitting around the table in the chapel, the sun shining through the stained glass.

No one answered and Harry thought their Professor's sense of drama had transferred onto them. He was about to offer himself up but Tom snatched the envelope off the tabletop abruptly, tearing it open.

Harry watched him curiously, how his eyes flitted across the paper, eyebrows raising in surprise, his teeth catching on his bottom lip. Maybe Harry had underestimated how important this information was, if even Tom was worked up about it.

"Well?" Rick asked, perched on the edge of his seat, looking a bit pale.

Tom lowered the piece of paper, looking over them all quickly. "*Hamlet*," he murmured after a second.

Silence. Harry had no idea how to interpret it, he had no idea if this was good or bad news.

"You're kidding?" Theo whispered with wide eyes. Tom shook his head, handing over the paper, face still impassive. Theo scanned it, his eyes widening further. "Oh my god, they've given us *Hamlet*," he murmured in disbelief.

Harry was starting to get nervous with their odd reactions. "Is that—" he stumbled on his words as they all turned to look at him. He cleared his throat. "Is that a good thing?"

"Harry," Alphard said slowly after a beat of silence, "this is the best thing that could ever happen to us."

Harry frowned in confusion, unwilling to ask '*why?'* feeling completely out of the loop.

"They *never* give *Hamlet*," Abraxas said, a smile stretching across his face. "It's considered the holy grail of this school, they reserve it for the best of the best!"

"When was the last time it was played?" Gaspar asked with a delighted laugh.

"Decades ago," Tom murmured absentmindedly, fiddling with the corner of the piece of paper. Harry blinked, taken aback by the information. Tom's blank stare morphed into a smirk, his eyes lighting up. "I *knew it*," he said triumphantly, "I *knew* they'd give it to us."

Theo laughed, a delighted sound. “I can’t fucking believe it!” he exclaimed, rubbing his hands down his face.

In a matter of seconds the silence turned into loud cheering and Harry found himself grinning, watching as the boys clapped each other on the back, smiling up to their ears.

“Drinks!” Rick exclaimed loudly, carting two bottles of whiskey over. “We have all day to celebrate!”

“Oh god the pressure,” Gaspar said, clutching at his heart. “The pressure to excel.”

Theo laughed loudly, looping his arm around Gaspar’s shoulders. “We’ll be brilliant! We’ll go down in school history!”

“I can’t *believe* it,” Alphard murmured from beside Harry, taking the piece of paper and reading it for himself. Harry leant against him, reading over his shoulder, and, lo and behold :

This year’s seventh year Winter play is :
HAMLET, PRINCE OF DENMARK
We look forward to seeing your rendition.
“As good luck would have it”
Professors Dumbledore, Snape, and McGonagall

“You must be happy,” Harry said, smiling at Alphard as he sat back in his seat properly.

“You’ve no idea,” Alphard breathed out, looking at him with stars in his eyes. “My whole family went to this school and *none* of them got *Hamlet*.”

“They’ll be proud then,” Harry commented.

“Oh not proud,” Alphard said quickly, grinning, “*envious*.”

Harry laughed, startled. “I bet Sirius will be happy for you.”

Alphard’s smile softened. “I’d love to tell him—if anyone in my family would be proud it’d be him.”

“I can give him a ring once we’ve got the cast list, you can talk to him then,” Harry offered with a smile.

“Brilliant,” Alphard said with a grin. He gripped Harry’s shoulders as he stood up, looking into his eyes, his own alight with life. “I can’t *believe* we got *Hamlet*!” he said again, glee evident in his tone before he let go of Harry, who was laughing, to go and celebrate with the others.

Harry watched him go, smiling and shaking his head before looking back across the table. Tom was watching him but turned away quickly, accepting the glass Rick was handing to him.

“Harry, roll up!” Theo exclaimed, pulling Harry away from his thoughts and tossing him everything he needed. Harry laughed, doing just that.

“Okay we need to give predictions on who’s getting what role,” Abraxas said as they all sat back down.

“Right,” Rick said, tapping on the table. “Tom as Hamlet, Theo as Horatio, Abraxas as Polinius, me as Claudius, Margaux of sixth year as Ophelia, Viola of sixth year as the queen, Gaspar as Laertes, Alphard as Rosencratz and Harry—er, Harry could be Fortinbras.”

“I think they might cast Harry as Ophelia, you know,” Gaspar said thoughtfully. “He’s shown he doesn’t have a problem with playing girls.”

“No they wouldn’t cast a boy as a girl for a school production,” Abraxas interjected. “I think Harry could be Laertes.”

“Who would be Fortinbras?” Rick asked.

“I think they’ll give the role to a sixth year, he has very few lines,” Alphard commented in turn.

“There aren’t that many main characters,” Rick said. “Two of which are girls, there are seven of us remember, some of us will have to have smaller roles.”

“There’s the ghost of Hamlet’s father who has quite a few lines, more than Fortinbras,” Theo commented.

“I bet Rick’ll play Hamlet’s father,” Gaspar said decisively. “He’s the one who looks the most like Tom anyway.”

Rick hummed in thought. “Maybe, his father’s ghost is definitely my kind of character.”

“Who would play Claudius then, in that scenario?” Alphard asked, taking the joint Harry offered him while he set to rolling another, listening to their ideas.

“Me,” Theo said with a smirk. “And Harry would play Horatio.”

Harry looked up sharply, forgetting about the joint he was rolling for a second. “I’m not going to get Horatio,” he said matter-of-factly. “Like Rick said, I’ll get a smaller part.”

“Harry, your audition was incredible, the speech very reminiscent of the final scene of *Hamlet* when Hamlet dies and Horatio mourns him,” Theo said, leaning forward on the table.

“You were all a lot better,” Harry replied quickly. “They’re not gonna pick me just because the speech I auditioned with is vaguely similar in theme with Horatio’s last lines.”

“Mark my words,” Theo said, tapping the table, “Harry’s playing Horatio.”

“I disagree,” Tom said suddenly, catching everyone’s attention. “If not Dumbledore, then Snape won’t allow him to get such a big part.”

“Dumbledore gets last say though, and he seems fond of Harry,” Theo replied. “I don’t think Harry’s situation is relevant to the casting, if he’s here it’s because they deemed him to be at least as good as any of us. There’s no reason for him to get small roles.”

Tom glared at Theo for a second. “It would be unfair beyond belief.”

“It’s not unfair if he’s just *better* than us,” Theo said, unyielding under the force of Tom’s stare.

“Well, he’s not,” Tom said scathingly and Harry was starting to hate this conversation.

Theo scoffed though. “You saw his audition as well as I did—and he must have done something truly *brilliant* to get into the school in the first place. You’re not being objective.”

“*I’m* not being objective?” Tom said incredulously. “You must be delusional if you think he didn’t only get in because of who his parents were and his sob story—not to mention his Godfather.”

Harry cleared his throat, meeting Tom’s look head on. “As much as I’m loving this debate about how shit I am—I am right here, so maybe keep it to yourselves for the time being. And I agree, I don’t think I’ll get Horatio so we can move on.” He gave Tom as filthy a look as he was receiving. It was one thing to have a go at him privately, a whole other to do so in front of other people.

“Sorry, Harry,” Theo said, looking genuinely apologetic before frowning in Tom’s direction. “I do really believe you could get the part though.”

“Well I don’t,” Tom scoffed.

“Has it ever crossed your mind that I don’t actually give a shit about what you think?” Harry said, unable to stop himself before the words had fallen from his mouth. “Your confidence is admirable but not everyone cares about what you have to say,” he added with a bit less bite behind it—he might as well commit at that point, he thought.

It was *silent* in the library, the tension thick as they stared at each other. Tom’s jaw was clenched, his stare so intense Harry wondered if he was trying to kill him with his mind. Maybe when he noticed it wasn’t working he’d actually lunge across the table and try to kill him with his hands.

Harry held his gaze, refusing to back down. He’d never backed out of a fight—he wasn’t about to start now.

Tom got up suddenly, making Alphard jump beside Harry. “Call me when we get the casting,” he said, rather unexpectedly, to Theo. As he rounded the table to the stairs he stopped and turned back to Harry. “And go fuck yourself, Potter,” he spat, as if he couldn’t help himself.

Harry gave him a look, leaning into the childish urge to stick his middle finger up at him with a smile. Tom’s scowl deepened and he stalked off. He seemed to be leaning into his own

childishness as he slammed his bedroom door behind himself, the sound echoing around the chapel and making Harry's ears ring.

The silence persisted for a minute or so, time in which Harry went back to rolling the joint as if nothing had happened.

"What the fuck just happened?" Rick said on a breath as Harry was packing the joint.

"That's drama, boys," Theo said, his eyes wide and a small smile pulling at his lips.

Harry snorted, lighting the joint. "Sorry, I'll apologise to him later."

"I don't think you should be the one to apologise," Alphard murmured, as if afraid he'd be overheard.

Harry gave him a look. "I don't know you all very well but I feel quite confident in saying that Tom will not be apologising."

"You're not wrong," Theo said, seemingly appraising Harry.

It took a while but the chatter in the library picked back up, talking about *Hamlet* again and going over everyone's auditions. The afternoon wore on in a similar manner until they started taking shifts, as they called them, to go and wait for the casting to be posted on the information board by the Great Hall.

Gaspar took the first forty-five minute shift. The others explained to Harry that they did this every time there was a casting to be announced, making sure they were the first to know who was playing who. Harry offered to go after Gaspar came back empty handed, happy to get out of the chapel for a while. It was a fairly long forty-five minutes but he made the acquaintance of a nice art student called Luna. She seemed a bit strange but she was fun, her dungarees covered in paint stains and hair held up by a paintbrush.

Abraxas went after, then Alphard, then Theo, and finally Rick. They were growing antsy by the time it was Rick's turn as the clock was edging towards midnight. His turn was *almost* up, he'd already been gone thirty minutes and Gaspar was starting to complain about having to go again, when he burst into the room with a sheet of paper. He was flailing it madly, a shit-eating grin on his face.

"Okay wait!" Theo exclaimed excitedly as he jumped up from his seat. "We have to get Tom first!"

"I'll go," Harry said quickly, intending to make his apology as swift as possible.

"It's your funeral," Rick said after everyone had given Harry odd looks.

He rolled his eyes before getting up and walking up the stairs. He knew they were all listening intently, the gossips.

He knocked tentatively on Tom's door. He didn't get a reply but he opened it anyway, slipping inside and closing the door behind him for some semblance of privacy.

Tom glared at him when he walked in, lounging on his bed with a book in his hand, pretty as ever. It was dark out, and the only light in the room was that of the soft orange glow of the lamp from the bedside table. Books were piled high on the desk at the foot of Tom's bed, but other than that the room was tidy.

Harry cleared his throat. "The casting's out, no one's seen it, we're waiting for you."

Tom snapped his book shut and stood up quickly. "I hardly think that warrants coming into my room."

Harry sighed, repressing an annoyed eye roll. "I just wanted to apologise for earlier," he said, daring to meet Tom's icy stare.

"Don't expect one in return—I told you, we're not friends," Tom stated, crossing his arms over his chest.

Harry laughed lightly, but it was humourless. "I don't expect an apology, but I wanted to apologise anyway. Just—what happened to my parents isn't a sob story I go around to get my way, alright? And I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk about them like that. They're dead, there's nothing more to it. Just like I don't use Sirius to get my way—" Tom scoffed and Harry huffed— "contrary to what you might think, I *don't*," he pressed. "Sirius is famous, yeah, but do you really think this school would give him a second of their time? He's a junkie, of course they wouldn't. He managed to grab their attention long enough to get me an audition, but it's the audition that got me into the school."

Tom was staring at him blankly, but still Harry pushed on. "You might not think I deserve to be here and you have every right to—I understand why you're pissed at someone barging in during your last year when you've worked hard to get here. But don't for a second think that I didn't work fucking hard to get here too. It's not because we got here differently that either one of us deserves it any more than the other. We don't have to be friends, but we need to get along to a certain degree because we're gonna have to work together." Harry caught his breath quickly before adding, with a barely suppressed sneer, "So either you can carry on being a twat about it or we can be civil to each other. I don't care if you don't like me—frankly you haven't made the best impression on me either—but like I said, we don't have to be friends."

He stuck his hand out, ready for it to be ignored, and said, "Truce?"

Tom swiped his gaze over him quickly, his arms twitching where they were crossed. He strode forward, as if to shoulder past Harry but stopped abruptly, just on that side of too close. Harry had to tilt his chin back to look at him—he really was tall—and he could smell his aftershave—or perfume, or whatever it was—and his head span briefly.

Tom took his hand, his long fingers wrapping around Harry's, and held onto it. "Truce," he echoed in a murmur, holding on just a beat longer as he leant closer. "And don't fucking speak to me like that again," he whispered—too close, too intense—his breath fanning against Harry's lips.

Harry tilted his head back that extra measure, swallowing through the suffocating tension, still holding Tom's hand in his. "Well don't be fucking rude," he managed to choke out, his voice more level than he'd have thought.

Something akin to a faint smirk pulled at Tom's lips, as if he were amused, before he let go of Harry's hand abruptly, shouldering past him roughly. Harry let out a shaky breath, blinking against the small black spots dancing in his vision. He brought his hand back to his side, the feeling of Tom's soft skin against his lingering and making heat rush to his cheeks.

He shook his head, trying to get his brain back in order before letting his small smile form on his lips and turning on his heels, closing Tom's door behind him and following him down the stairs.

"Fucking finally!" Rick exclaimed as they reappeared in the library.

Theo stopped what he was doing, which seemed to be pacing, and glared at Rick. "I don't know what the fuck you're impatient about, you *know*, come on show us!"

Rick placed the paper on the table, face up, and stepped back with a smirk. They all rushed to the table to get a good look. Harry read, his eyes scanning the page as his jaw dropped.

For the Winter play - Hamlet : CASTING
TOM RIDDLE (7th year) : HAMLET
THEODORE NOTT (7th year) : CLAUDIUS
ABRAXAS MALFOY (7th year) : POLONIUS
HARRY POTTER (7th year) : HORATIO
ALPHARD BLACK (7th year) : LAERTES
VIOLA CARROW (6th year) : OPHELIA
MARGAUX ROSIER (6th year) : GERTRUDE, QUEEN OF DENMARK
GASPAR AVERY (7th year) : ROSENCRANTZ
RICHARD LESTRANGE (7th year) : GHOST OF HAMLET'S FATHER ***AND*** *FORTINBRAS*

The list went on but Harry stopped reading, having recognised all his classmates' names. His heart was in his throat and the silence of the library weighed heavy on him. Despite his speech to Tom, he didn't actually think he deserved such a role that much—not after seeing his classmates' talent.

"What did I tell you?" Theo said to the room at large, a delighted laugh following his words.

"We need to get you down to the bookie's, I think," Alphard said faintly, still going over the list.

Harry stepped back, feeling a bit overwhelmed. Theo came over to him, a joint hanging between his lips, and he placed both hands on Harry's cheeks, tilting his chin back. "You're alright, Harry," he said gently. "You definitely deserve the part, your audition was brilliant, come on, loosen up, it's a cause for celebration." He dropped his left hand, his right one still cradling Harry's jaw, and pinched the joint between his thumb and forefinger, placing it between Harry's lips.

Harry inhaled, letting the smoke trickle down the back of his throat, easing his airway. Theo took the joint back and Harry exhaled on a laugh, a grin stretching across his lips.

“There you go,” Theo said with a smile, tapping his cheek gently. “And congratulations to Tom for landing the lead! Not that any of us are surprised,” he added, turning back to the room.

The others clapped happily and Harry joined in, giving Tom a quick smile.

“Yeah good luck memorising over a thousand lines, personally I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes,” Rick said with a grin.

“Yes, have fun being my dead father,” Tom replied with a smirk, more casual than Harry had ever seen him.

“Yeah I’ve never died before a play began,” Rick said with a laugh.

“Right! I’m making my speciality to celebrate!” Theo exclaimed, slinking off to the kitchen to many groans.

“Oh brilliant, we’ll have a right hangover for Snape’s class tomorrow,” Abraxas said, already rubbing at his temples.

Harry laughed, thinking it would be a good time to go and give Sirius a quick ring. He followed where Theo had disappeared to but turned before getting to the kitchen, into the hallway by the stairs where the phone hung on the wall.

He picked it up, about to dial the number before he heard Theo talking.

“So, what’s going on?” he asked.

Harry thought he was talking to himself before he heard Tom’s answering, “What do you mean?”

“Alright,” Theo said, “how come you changed your audition?”

“I didn’t.”

“You told me you were doing a scene from *Othello*,” Theo replied.

“I changed my mind.”

“To *Hernani*?” Theo asked disbelievingly. “Odd choice, when did you make that decision?”

“A while ago,” Tom replied vaguely.

“Let me guess, Monday?”

“*What* are you trying to get at?” Tom asked in an angry whisper.

It was silent for a few seconds, until: “You just seem a bit on edge, that’s all.”

“I’m fine.”

“I know you better than you think, Tom,” Theo pressed. “He makes you feel off kilter—not many people do that to you. You’re allowed to *feel* you know? You don’t always have to control everything.”

“Shut up,” Tom replied, less scathing than Harry would have thought. Although, maybe he just couldn’t hear properly over the sound of his pounding heart.

“You thought he was good, brilliant even,” Theo stated, voice quieter; Harry had to strain to hear him. Silence. “And I don’t know if that scared you or turned you on—”

“Will you *shut up*,” Tom hissed.

Theo laughed. “I’m assuming it’s a bit of both then?”

“You need to start minding your own business.”

“Yeah alright,” Theo conceded. “Just don’t wind yourself up about it. And congratulations on landing Hamlet—I know it was your dream part for this year.”

“Thanks,” Tom replied softly after a beat of silence.

Harry stopped eavesdropping then, feeling quite bad about having done so in the first place, and dialled the number that was burned in the back of his mind, needing to distract himself from whatever *that* was.

It rang three times and Harry was just about to hang up and dial the number again when he heard Sirius’s telltale, “*Yeah, hello?*”

“Sirius,” Harry said, a grin spreading across his lips. “It’s me, Harry.”

“*Kiddo!*” Sirius all but shouted back. Harry heard him plopping down onto the sofa by the phone and could just picture him in his dressing gown. “*How’s it going? Had any auditions yet?*”

Harry smiled, coiling the cord around his finger. “Yeah actually, that’s why I’m ringing, and to make sure you got back okay.”

“*Oh I’m fine, you know obviously there were a bunch of absolute wankers on the road but when is there not?*” He laughed and Harry smiled, shaking his head. “*But tell me about you then, how’s it going?*”

“Well,” Harry replied, “we had our auditions for the December play and we’ve just got the casting back, have a guess.”

“*What? Guess which play you’ve got?*”

“Yeah,” Harry replied, biting back a grin.

Sirius hummed down the receiver. "*I'm not sure, I could see you in something like* Julius Caesar *or* King Lear*, have I got it right?*"

Harry grinned. "We've got *Hamlet*."

Sirius was silent for a second before shouting, "*You are fucking kidding me!*"

"I'm not, Sirius! I promise," Harry said with a laugh.

"*Who are you playing?*" Sirius asked almost hysterically. He'd definitely jumped off the sofa.

"Horatio," Harry replied, almost shyly.

Sirius laughed loudly, sounding absolutely delighted. "*That's my boy!*" he exclaimed brightly. "*God kiddo I am so proud!* Hamlet*, God I can't believe it! I cannot wait to come and watch you play in December.*"

"You'll come?" Harry asked, almost surprised.

"*Kiddo of course I'll fucking come, do you think I'd miss this? Fuck no,*" he said vehemently.

"Thanks Sirius," Harry said quietly with a smile.

"*Tell me everything Harry, how's it going? How are the people you're with? Who are they?*"

Harry smiled. "It's brilliant, the other boys—there are no girls in seventh year this year—are really nice. We get on well. Oh! Sirius, you will not believe who's with me! I'm rooming with him!"

"*Who?*" Sirius asked eagerly, always keen on gossip.

"Alphard," Harry replied.

It was silent before Sirius gasped dramatically. "*Alphard Black?*" he all but shrieked. "*My nephew?*"

"Yep!"

"*Harry get that boy on the phone this instant or so help me God,*" Sirius said dramatically and Harry laughed.

"Okay I'll get him, I'll ring you some other time alright, Sirius? And you can call this number any time and leave a message if no one picks up," Harry said.

"*'Course kiddo, love you, have fun,*" Sirius replied, his voice softer.

"Love you too Sirius, let me just go get Alphard for you." Harry covered the receiver and leant towards the library. "Alphard!" he shouted.

"Yeah, what's going on?" Alphard said, appearing in the doorway, looking a bit distressed.

“I’ve got Sirius who wants to talk to you,” Harry said with a grin.

Alphard’s eyes lit up and he made grabby hands for the phone. Harry handed it to him happily.

“Uncle Sirius?” Alphard said into the receiver, a bit of a shake to his voice.

“*Alphie*!” Harry heard Sirius shout before he left them to it, a smile on his face. He returned to the library where Tom and Theo were back. They must have passed him in the hallway without him realising.

Theo immediately got him to try a strangely colourful drink he’d made that he refused to divulge the contents of, and while it was delicious, Harry couldn’t help but agree with Abraxas—he could already feel the hangover looming over him.

— Scene six —

It was, in fact, a horrendous hangover. Harry woke up feeling like someone was banging pots and pans over his brain. He had to actively fight himself to stay awake, wanting nothing more than to go back to sleep. They'd called it a night at three in the morning, all completely sloshed, except for Tom who had still seemed somewhat lucid.

If Harry remembered correctly they'd done a very drunk rendition of *Hamlet* from memory, mixing up everyone's parts. Harry had landed on Hamlet himself and had absolutely butchered his character. In his drunken state he'd gone up to Tom and said something along the lines of, "It's a good job you got the lead and not me, what a shitshow that would've been," which had earned him an amused sort of hum.

Theo had played Horatio and had placed a kiss on his forehead, saying, "Night night, sweet Prince," when Harry 'died', which made him laugh so hard he 'came back to life' changing the course of the end of the play. It had been a very fun night, and Harry secretly thought the hangover was worth it.

Sat in the Great Hall at half past seven in the morning, though, cradling a coffee, his glasses dropped onto the table and eyes closed against the lights, he wasn't ready to admit that it had been worth it.

Only Tom seemed in good health, aside from the dark smudges under his eyes that were worse than usual. The rest of them were all in various states of dead on their feet or in the process of dying.

"I really fucking hate you, Theo," Rick grumbled after downing his third glass of water.

"I hate me too," Theo mumbled, slumped in his seat across from Tom, sunglasses hanging on the edge of his nose.

"Snape's going to kill you all," Tom stated from behind his book. "You know how much he hates when we're a bit out of it."

"Yeah well, no offence to him but did *he* get *Hamlet* in seventh year?" Alphard said tetchily. "I didn't think so."

"Yeah and that'll make him all the more angrier," Abraxas said with a sigh.

"Did you know Snape and Sirius were in the same year when they came to school?" Alphard said, turning to Harry.

Harry shook his head before he stilled, absolute dread coursing through him. He leant his elbows on the table, burying his head in his hands. "Please tell me his first name isn't Severus, please please please please."

"It…is," Alphard said carefully, sounding confused.

Harry groaned. “Kill me. Kill me now.”

“What is it?” Theo asked, sounding amused.

Harry sighed, putting his glasses back on. “My dad and Snape *hated* each other, Sirius and my dad used to call him Snivellus. And—fuck, he was friends with my mum though but once he came by our house and my mum wasn’t in, just me and my dad, and I repeated *everything* my dad said about him to his face. But I said it as if it was coming from *me*, I even gave him the finger and called him a ‘greasy old bat that has never seen a shower in his life’.”

There was a beat of shocked silence before Theo *snorted*, dissolving into unstoppable giggles for at least three whole minutes. Tom looked disinterested but Harry was pretty sure he caught a small smirk from behind his book. The others were laughing in disbelief.

“Right, we’re safe then today,” Theo said once he’d calmed down. “Snape won’t even notice we’re there, he’ll be too busy bullying Harry.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Harry grumbled. “Should I apologise? Or will he have forgotten? I can’t *believe* I didn’t recognise him yesterday.”

“He’ll definitely not have forgotten,” Abraxas said matter-of-factly. “But don’t mention it, it’ll only make him angrier.”

“Literally kill me,” Harry mumbled, dropping his head to the table.

His wish to die only intensified as the morning wore on.

“You all look awful,” Snape declared as he entered the classroom at eight o’clock sharp where they were all already seated at a long table facing a blackboard. Harry was starting to wonder if this school had no normal classrooms.

“Good morning Professor,” Tom said, all of them echoing the greeting.

“Nice to see you, Tom,” Snape said, “congratulations on your part, your audition was good.”

“Thank you,” Tom replied smoothly.

“You all probably have a very high esteem of yourselves—undoubtedly too high. We will be tearing that down. Potter come up to the front of the classroom,” Snape declared.

Harry blinked. “What?” he said stupidly. He was really starting to regret whatever Theo had made him drink.

Snape glared at him. “Are you deaf as well as blind?”

Harry scowled, pushing his chair back and standing up, not caring for the scraping sound it made that had his classmates wincing. He walked around the large table and stood in front of the blackboard.

“An actor, while pretentious beyond belief, does not get on stage for nothing. They always have ulterior motives, the wish to be someone else. Potter, your strengths and weaknesses, now,” Snape said, standing to the side of the blackboard and staring pointedly at Harry, his gaze cold.

“Er—as an actor or a person?” Harry asked, feeling extremely uncomfortable.

“Did you listen to what I just said? They are two in the same,” Snape snapped.

“They’re not actually,” Harry replied, with maybe a bit too much attitude in the words. “If you’re asking me my strengths as an actor I’d say I’m versatile and convey emotion well, and, as for my weaknesses, I would say I can lack a certain elegance sometimes and I don’t always enunciate words correctly.”

Snape scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Very superficial of you, tell us what your strengths and weaknesses are as a person then.”

Harry bit back a scowl. “I’d say I’m kind and can generally get on with everyone but I’m also quick to anger.”

“Add arrogance to your defaults, I’m sure there are many more,” Snape said with a sneer. “And tell us how that translates to your acting.”

In his hungover state, a headache started to bloom across his temples. He was trying to piece together vague memories he had of Snape, while keeping up with the interrogation.

“Being nice helps me in conveying emotion when playing a character I suppose, helps me empathise with what the character is going through. I’m not sure how anger issues—or arrogance—” he added pointedly— “translate into my acting though, except that it can make me difficult to work with at times.”

“What do you do with that anger when you get on stage?” Snape asked.

“I—don’t know,” Harry said after a small silence, thrown by the question.

Snape rolled his eyes. “Let me phrase this in a way that will be easier for you to understand,” he said in a very patronising tone that made Harry’s shoulders tense and irritation flare up his spine. “When you get on stage what do you do with your grief for your parents, for instance?”

Harry felt *very* put on the spot and he didn’t dare look at the others. He crossed his arms across his chest, cleared his throat, and said, “It helps me understand a character’s grief—and portray it in a way that’s convincing.”

Snape seemed frustrated, whether it was because Harry was answering his questions genuinely or if he was just like that, Harry didn’t know. “Tell me, Potter,” he said, “how was it living with Petunia and her husband?”

Harry stilled, suddenly very angry at his Professor. “I don’t see how that’s relevant,” he bit out.

“Then tell me,” Snape added, “how did it feel when your Godfather was too busy getting high to take you in? How did it feel to have to go and live with Petunia instead?”

Harry dug his nails into his arms and bit his cheeks, feeling an angry flush burn his cheeks. “I don’t blame him.”

“Oh?” Snape said, an infuriating smirk on his face. “How many times did he promise he’d get clean for you? Humour me, Harry.”

“I don’t see how this is relevant,” Harry said through clenched teeth.

“Did you not resent him then?”

“He was grieving,” Harry spat.

“But was it not his duty as your Godfather to look after you in the event of your parents’ death? Was it not his duty to look after you in grief?”

“Look if you’re still pissed ‘cause they didn’t pick you as Godfather just say so,” Harry spat, unable to keep the words in. When Snape just stared at him, Harry went on. “You *knew* and I didn’t see you doing anything either, in fact I never saw you after the funeral. You don’t need the title of Godfather to care for someone and make sure they’re safe.”

Snape laughed but there was no humour behind the sound. “You resent me but not your pathetic excuse of a guardian?”

“I don’t actually,” Harry snapped. “But I don’t see Sirius putting me on the spot either.”

“Arrogant,” Snape sneered. “Just like your father, does your dear Sirius ever call you James?”

Harry physically *felt* his face fall. It was something that happened often when Sirius was high or drunk, where he looked straight through Harry and only saw *James*. Harry didn’t mind per se but it hurt. His years with the Dursleys had caused a certain amount of damage and it made him doubt Sirius’s love for him.

“There it is,” Snape said as if victorious. “You may have anger issues, Harry, but under all that lurks self-doubt and a crippling sense of unworthiness. Do you really believe you are unlovable?”

Harry couldn’t say anything, his tongue locked behind his teeth. To his absolute horror he realised his eyes were stinging but he swallowed everything down, willing it to *stay down.*

“You see,” Snape said, turning to the rest of Harry’s classmates. Maybe he’d taken pity on him, maybe he’d proven his point. “Behind every actor lurks an ulterior motive for acting. You do not become an actor if you do not wish to *be someone else*. This term we will focus on what that is for each and every one of you. You may regain your seat, Potter,” he added. His voice had lost in cruelty, and he told him to sit down with nothing more than politeness, and Harry’s head was spinning with it.

Harry didn't move for a second, utterly rooted to the spot. After another beat of silence though he unclenched his jaw and untensed his shoulders, walking back to his seat between Theo and Alphard mindlessly. He didn't look at any of them—*couldn't* look at any of them.

He didn't pay much attention to the rest of the lesson. His skin was crawling and he desperately wanted to get *out*, lock himself in his room or ring Hermione or something—*anything* that wasn't stewing in his anxieties out in the open.

"Potter stay back," Snape said as the lesson came to an end and they all packed their things up in silence. It was tense in the classroom and had been ever since Harry was called up to the front.

He looked up at the Professor for the first time since he'd regained his seat and levelled him with a glare fuelled by all the hatred he had stored away in him. "No thanks," he replied coldly.

"It is not a request," Snape said, just as coldly.

"Go fuck yourself," Harry bit back, "and that's not a request either." He didn't wait for a reply as he walked out of the classroom.

— Scene seven —

Harry thought about skiving off Dumbledore's lesson but worried he'd be in enough trouble for telling a Professor to go and fuck themselves so he went, sitting on the sofa he shared with Tom. Dumbledore had sent him a few curious glances throughout the lesson but didn't call upon him which he was grateful for. They started discussing *Hamlet*, analysing some scenes and characters. Harry listened halfheartedly.

When the lesson was finished he was quick to pack his things away and leave the classroom, not bothering with going to the Great Hall for lunch, heading straight to the chapel.

The other boys didn't follow him and Harry was grateful for it. When he got to the chapel he didn't know what to do. He wanted to ring Hermione but she'd probably be busy with university while Ron would be at work. He wanted to ring Sirius but was too afraid he'd pick up the phone with a hopeful "*James*?" — it was a very unlikely thing to happen but still, knots formed in Harry's stomach anytime he thought about picking up the phone and dialling his number. He thought of ringing Remus but he'd undoubtedly be busy too.

He ended up just going upstairs and laying in his bed, halfheartedly flicking through his copy of *Hamlet*.

They had the afternoon off again, in preparation for their repetitions that would start the following week, and they were to familiarise themselves with the text in the meantime.

He heard when the others got back but they were quiet, nothing like the rowdiness from the previous night. He could hear the murmur of their soft chatter as he read.

It was much later in the day, late afternoon, that a knock sounded on his door. He blinked up from his book and rubbed at his eyes that had grown sore. "Yeah?" he said, thinking it would be Alphard who had the decency to knock on his own door.

When it was opened, it was Theo who appeared, walking into the room and closing the door behind himself.

"Hi," Harry said, surprised.

Theo smiled, sitting at the end of Harry's bed. "I brought us a joint," he said with a grin, "open the window, will you?"

Harry smiled, a small breath of relief leaving him. He sat up against his headboard and reached up to open the window, letting the cool Scottish air pour into the room.

"So, you okay?" Theo asked, lighting the joint and inhaling.

Harry hummed, reaching over to the nightstand and grabbing the cup of water there. "Use this as an ashtray," he said, handing the glass to him.

Theo smiled, tilting his head to the side. "Are you gonna answer my question?"

Sighing, Harry said, “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?” Theo asked sceptically. “No one will think less of you if you’re not. It was brutal and we’re all pissed at Snape because of it.”

“I’m a bit pissed,” Harry conceded with a shrug. “But he didn’t say anything I don’t already know about myself so I’m not upset about what he said, more how he said it.”

“We all agree, and none of us are looking forward to our turns,” Theo replied, handing the joint to Harry who took it appreciatively, happy to have something to do with his hands. “Do you want to talk about *what* he said?”

Harry inhaled, looking away from Theo. “Not really,” he ended up saying. “There’s nothing to say.”

“Who was that Petunia?” Theo asked anyway.

Harry sighed. “You just want gossip material, don’t you?” he asked with a small smile.

Theo smiled back. “You know me too well already, Harry,” he said, sounding amused. “But no, I genuinely just want to know, to know you better or to help you talk through stuff, whatever you want.”

Harry nodded, taking another drag of the joint. “My aunt Petunia is my mum’s sister. She has a husband called Vernon and a son called Dudley. When my parents died I went to live with them, my only living relatives, as Sirius was judged unfit to take care of me.”

“But you didn’t stay with them?” Theo asked, taking the joint back.

“My parents died when I was eight,” Harry said, thinking back. “I stayed with them full time until I was thirteen, then by that time Sirius had gone to rehab so there was a trial period in which I got to stay with him part time. He wanted me to live with him full time, he hates my relatives, and we were getting there. But then he relapsed when I was just about to turn fourteen which meant I had to go back with my relatives. I didn’t fully get to stay with Sirius until I was seventeen.”

“Were your relatives…nice?” Theo asked carefully.

Harry shook his head. “Awful, actually.”

“Why?”

Harry shrugged. “My aunt had always been jealous of my mum—neither of them liked my dad and by extension they didn’t like me. I didn’t actually meet them until my parents had died and they were very reluctant to take me in. Their dislike turned to hatred because they were bitter at having to look after me.”

“Were they—abusive?” Theo asked carefully, frowning.

Harry nodded. “I suppose so.”

“What does that mean?”

“They’d have me do a lot of the cooking and cleaning around the house,” Harry said impassively. “I wasn’t allowed to eat with them or as much as them. My aunt was mean, always calling me names and stuff while my uncle was violent. My cousin bullied me at school with his friends. Stuff like that.”

“Oh,” Theo said faintly. “And you don’t…resent Sirius—for leaving you in that situation.”

Harry huffed, frustration mounting. “I don’t,” he said a bit harshly. “Because people like to forget that Sirius didn’t just go off the rails after my parents died—he was already grieving his brother. My parents’ death was just the nail in his coffin. I could never hate him for hurting.”

“His brother?”

“Regulus,” Harry replied. “Regulus Black, he killed himself when he was sixteen. In his sixth year here—Sirius was in his seventh. Sirius always blamed himself for it because he ran away from home to my dad’s when he was sixteen, leaving Regulus behind.”

“Oh,” Theo said again, lapsing into silence after.

The door opened suddenly, even though Harry hadn’t heard anyone walking up the stairs or along the landing. He looked up, past Theo, and saw Tom, of all people, standing in the doorway.

He had his arms crossed over his chest, looking cross. “No smoking in the bedrooms,” he said.

Theo turned. “I saw you smoking in your room yesterday,” he said, amused.

Tom clicked his tongue. “The others want to order pizza, we need to know what you want.”

“...Right,” Theo said, turning back to Harry with a funny look. “We’d best go down then.”

Harry nodded mutely, coughing and getting up, holding the glass full of ashy water in his hand. He felt a bit better at having spoken with Theo.

Theo got to Tom first and Harry heard him mutter a quiet, “No need to get jealous,” to which Tom told him to shut up. Harry, for the first time, was hit with the realisation that maybe Tom and Theo were together. That would explain why Tom seemed to have taken such a dislike to him, what with Theo being quite handsy.

“Wine, Harry?” Alphard asked when they got back downstairs.

He huffed out a laugh. “Do you ever stop drinking? But yeah, I’ll have a glass.”

Rick laughed. “We’re celebrating! First person to tell Snape to go and fuck himself, even though we’ve all wanted to do so since we were twelve.”

Harry snorted, thanking Alphard for the glass as he took what he'd come to think of as his seat. The easy atmosphere around them returned, none of them mentioning anything about Snape's lesson after that.

Later, after copious amounts of pizza and wine, Harry was lying in his bed. He stared at the ceiling, his inquiry on the tip of his tongue. "Alphard," he said finally, the name coming out hesitant.

"Yeah?"

Frowning at himself, a blush creeping up his neck and breath coming in weird, he asked: "Are Theo and Tom together?"

"*What?*" Alphard said, turning to look at him from over on his bed, letting out a startled laugh. "What on earth made you think that?"

Harry shrugged, the sheets rustling beneath him with the movement. "I dunno, just an impression."

"Wow," Alphard said after a couple seconds. "No they're definitely not, they're just good friends. I don't think Tom's ever had a partner."

"Alright," he replied, feeling more confused than before and oddly relieved, which was something he didn't want to think about too much. It would be so typical of him to develop a crush on someone who didn't like him. "Night."

"Night Harry," Alphard said with a laugh.

— Scene eight —

“God this is gonna be a nightmare,” Gaspar said with a sigh, stretching his shoulders.

They were waiting in front of one of the studios in the school for their first lesson of the year with Professor McGonagall. From what Harry had gathered she was a strict woman but kind, who had no notion of boundaries. He’d been warned to expect uncomfortable questions and situations. She was their trainer of sorts; she instructed dance and stage combat as well as any other physical faculties they may need onstage.

“Good morning boys!” McGonagall said brightly as she appeared around the corner, coming up to them and unlocking the studio. She received a few tired grumbles and ‘morning’s in response. “My, you all look terrible, must seventh year students always abuse their newfound freedom at the beginning of the year?” she lamented as she ushered them inside. “Stand in line.”

They did as told and she paced before them, passing a calculating gaze over each and every one of them.

“Mr. Potter, welcome,” she said as she looked him over.

“Thank you,” Harry replied, surprised.

“I’ll get to you in a moment, I must first review your peers, stand to the side please.”

Harry stood off near the long mirror that ran the length of the room, holding back a grin as his classmates fidgeted under their Professor’s stare.

She grasped Gaspar by the arm and pulled him to the side slightly. Gaspar closed his eyes and murmured a quiet, “Oh no,” that made them all stifle a laugh. She inspected him closely, feeling his biceps and tapping his stomach.

“Still got your tummy I see,” she commented.

Gaspar sighed. “Professor, we've had this conversation for seven years now, I’m just not a rock-hard-abs kind of guy.”

She hummed. “So you have told me,” she said disapprovingly. “Not too bad though, I see you’ve broadened out a bit, still dreadfully short though.”

Gaspar gawked, eyes wide. “I can’t actually do anything about that!”

“You could if you wanted to,” she said as she pinched the end of his nose, and Harry had to bite his cheeks not to laugh. “Next, Mr. Malfoy, I see you’ve kept in shape, that’s good. Still a bit thin though, no? Did you exercise at all this summer? Bulk up a bit.”

Abraxas cringed under her scrutiny. “I tried.”

“Evidently not enough,” she replied with a sniff. “Mr. Lestrange, as usual, in perfect form.” Rick stood a bit taller, smirking at the others. “Broad shoulders, lean, not bad at all. Have you been exercising over the summer?”

“Every day, Professor,” Rick said with a smile.

She nodded approvingly, seemingly satisfied. “Mr. Black, still as corpse-like as ever.”

“Professor!” Alphard complained, aghast. “You can’t call a student corpse-like.”

“I can do whatever I want you ungrateful boy,” she sniped, pulling at his collar and tilting his chin back. “You’re lucky you’re pretty, I’ll tell you that. Did you exercise at all?”

“Do you want a lie or a truth?” Alphard asked with a guilty smile.

“I’ll take that as a no, then,” she said, pinching his arm. “Frightfully skinny you are,” she said, shaking her head as she stood back from him. “At least try and exercise—for your health if nothing else.”

Alphard nodded dejectedly, hanging his head.

Professor McGonagall moved onto Theo next who pretended he couldn’t see her, looking up at the ceiling. “Mr. Nott,” she said, an air of menace in her tone.

“Professor,” Theo greeted warily.

“Have you stopped smoking?”

“Yes,” Theo replied immediately, “you can finally be proud of me.”

“Lies!” she exclaimed, twisting his ear, making him wince. “I can hear the wheeze in your lungs from here and smell the tobacco on you, do not lie to me.”

“Sorry, Professor,” Theo said, rubbing at his ear.

“You’re lanky,” she said, unforgiving.

“So you’ve told me,” Theo mumbled.

“How you wish to achieve grace with such unhealthy form is beyond me,” she said with a sigh, poking and prodding at his arms and stomach. “You are a lost cause, boy. I doubt I need to ask you if you’ve exercised.” Theo hung his head, shaking it minutely. McGonagall pursed her lips disapprovingly and moved onto Tom.

She didn’t touch Tom immediately as she’d done with the others, merely looking him over. “Still as handsome as ever, Mr. Riddle,” she commented, and Tom smirked lightly. “Exercise?”

“Yes,” Tom answered easily, and Harry couldn’t tell if he was lying or not.

She reached out, less abrupt than she had been with the others and felt his arms, nodding approvingly. “Still thin, that’s good,” she commented to herself. “But you’ve bulked up a bit, that’s not bad. You’re tall, that's an advantage, and you’re not lanky, like *some*,” she said pointedly, glancing over at Theo who hung his head again.

“Well,” she said once she’d stepped back, “I’m not disappointed but I’m not *happy* either. We will resume our training as if you had all followed the exercise routine I set out for you over the summer. If you can’t keep up, that's too bad for you.”

Harry watched, amused, as some of the boys nodded happily while others looked like they wanted the floor to swallow them up.

“Now, Mr. Potter,” she said, spinning around menacingly, and the smile dropped from Harry’s face.

“Yeah?”

“Tell me your strong suits and weaknesses in the physical aspects of theatre,” she instructed.

“I’m flexible,” Harry said immediately, ignoring the other boys as best he could, especially Theo’s amused smirk. “And I’m in pretty good physical shape, but I’m quite clumsy so I lack elegance in dance and stuff like that.”

“I see, that’s honest—good boy,” she said, and Harry had to fight not to blush. “You’re quite short but it might not be catastrophic, take off your shirt.”

“What?” Harry said, sure he’d misheard.

McGonagall levelled him with a stern look. “I do not like repeating myself, take off your shirt.”

“Er—okay?” he said, definitely blushing as he undid the buttons of his shirt as quickly as he could, slipping it off his shoulders. Rick wolf-whistled and Harry wanted to die. “Piss off,” he mumbled, tossing his shirt right at him.

“Alright, let’s see,” McGonagall said, catching his attention again. “Not bad at all, I’d expected worse. You’re quite skinny around your ribs,” she said, her sharp nails catching against the sensitive skin.

“Er—yeah, I’ve never managed to put the weight back on,” Harry said, awkward.

“When did you lose it?” she asked.

“When I was nine.”

She looked at him, frowning. “You have not managed to gain weight around your ribs in ten years?”

“Er—no,” Harry said, feeling supremely uncomfortable. “Is that weird?” he asked.

She shook her head absentmindedly. “It’s no matter anyway, you make up for it elsewhere. Lean stomach, not bad, a bit on the skinny side still,” she continued. “Flex your arms,” she instructed.

Harry could feel his blush in the roots of his hair but he did as told.

McGonagall gave him an appraising look. “Not bad at all,” she said, sounding pleased. “Do you play sports? Exercise?”

“I used to,” Harry replied, dropping his arms. “I played rugby for a while at school, that’s why my shoulders are stronger than they should be. I go running sometimes, but yeah—that’s all.”

“Are you good at fighting?” she asked, inspecting his knuckles.

“Er—I’ve won a few fights, yeah,” he said with a self-conscious laugh.

She gave him a quick smile, nodding. “Turn around and flex your shoulders again so we can see the state of your back.” Harry did, getting used to the scrutiny.

His self-consciousness came back in full force though as Theo wolf-whistled loudly. “Jesus Harry,” he said with a laugh. Harry looked into the mirror and saw their approving looks. Tom was looking away though, a red flush decorating his cheekbones which was strange seeing as though he hadn’t done anything yet.

“Now *that* is a back,” McGonagall commented, tracing his different muscles with her nail, pointing them out to the others. “It compliments your thin waist very well,” she said, turning Harry back around as he dropped his arms back down. “You’re right, you are in very good physical form which is a relief for me.”

Harry smiled, scrunching his nose up a bit. He’d always been awful at accepting compliments.

“Now, you said you are flexible, what do you mean?” she asked.

“Er—I just mean I’m flexible,” Harry said, unsure of what he was supposed to say. “I can do the splits, stuff like that. I can bend my back as well which is good for nice dips in dances—assuming I’m not leading.”

“Fantastic,” she said, giving him an approving look. “Demonstrate for us then.”

“The splits?” Harry asked, cringing. She nodded and he sighed, pulling his trousers up his thighs a bit to avoid them ripping—that would just be too embarrassing—and kicking his shoes off. Despite the lack of warm up, he sank into the splits easily. He’d been doing so since he was a child, his mum had taught him.

“Very good,” she said, holding out a hand to help him up which he took gratefully. “Finally a student who appreciates how physically demanding theatre is. Now,” she looked over at the other boys, “I would choose Mr. Lestrange but he’s an atrocious dancer.” Harry bit back a laugh as Rick looked to the side in embarrassment. “Mr. Riddle, come here.”

Harry didn't much feel like laughing then.

"Good, lead Mr. Potter in a brief dance that ends in a low dip, I want to see how he gets by in that department," she instructed as Tom came over.

Tom nodded, face impassive despite the faint colour to his cheeks. They looked at each other as their eyes locked, neither of them moving, while McGonagall waited to the side.

Harry cleared his throat. "Just don't drop me," he said faintly.

Tom rolled his eyes. "Do not take me for an amateur."

"I've had people drop me before, better safe than sorry," Harry mumbled back, swallowing as he took the hand Tom held out, their fingers sliding together as they had done when they'd shook on their truce.

"Can you dance?" Tom asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Er—I'm not great," Harry replied truthfully, trying not to jump as Tom's other hand met his waist. His fingers felt cold against his burning skin. He steadied himself, putting a hand on Tom's shoulder, looking up at him. They were much too close and Harry was struggling to breathe. He already knew he was done for—his cheeks were flaming, the blush probably spreading all down his neck and chest.

"Gaspar, play something on the piano," Tom said suddenly, looking away from Harry.

"On it boss," Gaspar replied, the sound of a piano playing sounding out in the studio a few seconds later.

"You're quite short," Tom mumbled, his fingers flexing on Harry's waist.

Harry's breath caught for a second. "You're quite tall," he replied, his voice coming out more breathless than he'd have liked.

Tom hummed, looking back down at him with a smirk. "Follow my lead then," he said, and that was all the warning Harry got before he was being moved, quite swiftly, around the room. Tom was apparently a brilliant dancer because Harry had never danced so well, his movements easy, his body answering to Tom's every push and pull.

Tom spun him around a few times before pulling him in—*close, too close*. Both of his hands came back to Harry's waist, dipping him easily, his own body following down as he guided him lower. One of his legs was between Harry's thighs and their hips were pressed together—Harry's arms looped around his shoulders before he drew them down the lengths of his arms, dipping them behind himself as he dropped his head back, baring the column of his throat, his fingers grazing the floor as his hair did.

They held it for a couple seconds, Harry's chest heaving, trying not to think about how Tom's hands covered the entirety of his lower back in a strong hold.

Tom pulled him back up gently and Harry latched onto his shoulders to steady himself again. They stood there for a second, Harry's hands on his shoulders and Tom's hands still on his lower back, as the piano slowed to a stop. They looked at each other, their eyes locking, and Tom's fingers flexed on Harry's skin, pulling him just that bit closer before he swallowed and let go entirely. Harry went too, removing his own hands and stepping back, grateful at least to see that Tom's cheeks were flushed too. He could pass his own blush off as exertion, nothing to do with Tom—*at all*.

It was silent for a couple seconds before Theo whistled low and said, "Talk about chemistry," a small incredulous laugh escaping him. The others had wide eyes and were biting back amused grins.

"Shut up Theo," Tom snapped, crossing his arms over his chest.

"That was very good," McGonagall said, looking at them approvingly. "You're right, Mr. Potter, your back holds a very elegant arch to it born of your natural flexibility I'd assume. But your dance was very elegant too, I wouldn't call it clumsy."

"Oh," Harry said, scratching at the back of his head. "I suppose I'm okay if I've got a good lead." He glanced over at Tom who glanced at him at the same time. "I can't lead a dance for the life of me though."

"I see," McGonagall said with a smile. "Well, I'm very satisfied Mr. Potter, you may redress."

Harry smiled, taking his shirt back from Rick who handed it to him happily, slipping it back on his shoulders and buttoning it up. He caught Tom's eye in the mirror and his blush—that had been dying down somewhat—came back in full force.

The rest of the lesson passed easily and Harry didn't have to do much. They did a bit of stretching before McGonagall told them they'd be focusing on stage combat for that term—physical and swordplay—to better prepare them for playing *Hamlet*. Alphard and Rick had to get up and demonstrate how to backhand someone convincingly without actually touching them and Harry got a good laugh out of it when Alphard kept moving back, unable to keep his reflexes in check.

He couldn't help himself from glancing at Tom from time to time though, still feeling the lingering ghost of his fingers on his waist.

— Scene nine —

They had Snape's class after McGonagall's, and while Harry had been dreading it before, the stretching they'd done beforehand had helped him relax a bit.

"I meant to tell you yesterday," Theo said as he started walking in step with Harry as they made their way to Snape's classroom, "but Dumbledore kept me back after yesterday's lesson and asked if you were alright, all that. Anyway, I told him what had happened in Snape's lesson and told him what you'd said and he only laughed a bit, so don't worry about getting in trouble."

Harry turned wide eyes on him. "Why the fuck would you tell Dumbledore?"

"He asked," Theo said with a shrug.

Harry sighed. "Fine, okay."

They entered the classroom a few minutes later and took their seats, the tense atmosphere coming back somewhat, for Harry anyway.

Snape appeared precisely when the lesson was meant to start, striding up to the blackboard with purpose. "We will continue what we started yesterday," he said, tone clipped. "Mr. Potter, come up to the front, please."

Harry's jaw ticked. "You've got to be kidding me," he muttered, more to himself than anyone else, but got up anyway, intent on beating Snape this time. Theo gave him an encouraging smile, as did the others.

When he got to the blackboard, Harry squared his shoulders—as if gearing up for a fight—and levelled Snape with a stare.

"I'm sure you've had time to reflect on what we said yesterday, so tell me, what are you most afraid of?" Snape asked coolly, looking down his nose at him.

Harry took a breath, genuinely thinking the question over in relation to what had happened yesterday. He could do this—he'd be flaying himself open in front of an audience but he could do it, and he could do it with his head held high.

"I'm afraid—" he started, planting his feet more firmly on the floor— "I'm afraid no one will like me, just for me. I worry people only like me or judge me in relation to others—see me as other people"

"Examples," Snape prompted.

Harry set his jaw, clearing his throat. "I worry Sirius only loves me because he sees me as a replacement for dad." Snape looked briefly taken aback but Harry pushed on. "It works for everyone—I worry you'll judge me based on whether you think of me in contrast to my dad, or my mum. I worry my classmates only assign me value, or think less of me, based on my

relationship to Sirius or my parents. I *know* my aunt and uncle judged me because of their dislike of my parents. Would you like me to go on?"

"How does this affect your relationships with others?" Snape asked as if he were interrogating him.

Harry thought for a second. "I accept disappointment and forgive very easily because I expect it—I expect people to come to dislike me when they get to know me and I expect for people to treat me badly." Snape made a gesture as if to say *carry on*, so Harry did. "Er—I suppose that in romantic relationships I tend to be attracted to people who don't like me from the start, because then it can only go up from there. If they don't like me at first glance there's a chance they'll like me as they get to know me."

"You accept abuse?" Snape asked, rather bluntly.

"I don't," Harry said quickly. "Which is contradictory, but I really don't."

Snape hummed. "And how does all this affect your acting?"

Harry looked up at the ceiling briefly, thinking. "It makes acting easy," he said eventually. "Because it's gratifying, at least people like me as the characters I play. They applaud once the play's over and that's gratifying, it means they liked me—whether they liked me as a character or as an actor, it doesn't matter. It nurses the delusion that people like me—and that makes acting easy."

Snape was staring at him as if looking straight into his soul and Harry fought to not fidget. "And who are you then?"

"Just—Harry, I suppose."

"And who do you wish to be?"

"Anyone else," Harry said with a shrug, "that's why I'm an actor."

"Who else in particular?" Snape pushed.

Harry sighed. "It depends on who I have in front of me. If you want an example, I'd like to be able to be my dad for Sirius—to be that version of him Sirius sees in me anyway. Like I'm sure there are parts of my mum in me, I'd like for only them to shine through for you."

"So you wish to bury yourself to appease what others wish you were?" Snape stated.

"Yeah, I suppose," Harry said with another shrug.

Snape didn't reply for a few seconds, tapping his fingers on the table as if thinking. "Let me ask you this," he said finally, "do you think you deserve to be here?"

Harry shifted, uncomfortable. "I don't know," he said faintly.

“And yet you would actively argue with me or anyone else who insinuated you do not, correct?”

Harry couldn’t *lie*, Tom was right there in the same room, someone he’d actively argued with over this exact issue. “I suppose, yeah.”

“Strange,” Snape said with a hum. “You were always a strange boy,” he added, and Harry couldn’t tell if it was fondness or distaste in his voice. “Do you recall when you were a child and you mocked me?” he asked lightly.

Harry cringed, a full body cringe. “I do,” he said quickly, “and I’m really sorry about that by the way—I’m sure you know this but I was just repeating what my dad had said.”

Snape waved a hand, dismissing him. “And yet,” he said, voice impassive, “do you recall when your father went on to say the exact same things a few minutes later, you defended me?”

Harry blinked, scouring his memory. He shook his head.

Snape nodded. “I thought you might not. You said you were versatile yesterday, I would call it contradictory. Your weakness lies in your self-doubt which plagues you to a crippling degree but your strength resides in the fact that you will not let anyone else doubt you.” Harry frowned, unsure of what to say. “Your confidence, which could be misconstrued as arrogance, is a quality an actor must possess, just like an actor must experience self-doubt.”

Harry nodded, feeling off-kilter. He could not for the life of him make out if Snape was complimenting him or slagging him off.

“I do not doubt that your relatives did a number on you but you will grow to appreciate yourself as a person as I’m sure people already do,” Snape added, still so impassive, and Harry wanted to melt into the floor. “As for your father, as much as he was arrogant and full of himself and I did despise him in school, we found a middle ground in later years and got along accordingly. And while you sided with your father in that one memory, you sided with me many times in making fun of him.”

Harry had no idea why Snape was telling him all this, why he was doing so in front of everyone else, but he nodded, confused but appreciative.

“And your lovely aunt forbade me from coming near her house,” he said with a wry smile after Harry’s silence, “so consider this my apology for leaving you in that situation.”

“You don’t need to apologise,” Harry said quickly. “It’s fine, and—thank you, I suppose.”

“You may retake your seat,” Snape said, giving him a quick smile. “Next week I will pick another one of you at random and give you the same treatment so be prepared for your ego to be torn down.”

The others grumbled, sending uneasy looks at each other. Harry took his seat, still frowning in confusion.

— Scene ten —

The weekend passed quickly, spent almost entirely in the chapel. They were meant to start rehearsing for the play Monday afternoon so they spent most of their time reading from their copies of *Hamlet*, re-enacting scenes together in small groups and annotating their books to add cues and directions.

On Saturday evening the others asked Harry how he'd done it in Snape's lesson, looking nervous. He'd shrugged and told them that they needed to view the issues from a very detached perspective, pretend they were analysing a character instead of themselves. That's what he had done.

On Monday morning they settled at their usual table in the corner of the cafeteria, more well rested than they had been the entire previous week, a general air of excitement lingering around them.

"I'll go check out letterboxes," Gaspar said with a grin, "we might have our parts for *Macbeth*."

"Oh shit I'd almost forgotten about that," Harry said, so caught up in *Hamlet* he was starting to forget any other plays existed.

"It's gonna be so hard not saying anything," Alphard said with a grin.

Gaspar came back and handed everyone a red envelope with their name on it. Harry took his, a feeling of apprehension settling in him despite not minding who he got to play. They all shared mischievous looks as they peeled their envelopes back carefully, exaggeratedly hiding their roles from each other.

Harry James Potter,
Please be at the cabin by the forest at a quarter to midnight on Halloween.
Come prepared for Act I, Scene 3, and Act IV, Scene 1.
You will be playing BANQUO.
Report to the costume department on October 18th at 2pm for a costume fitting.
Do not discuss this with your peers.

Harry bit back his grin as he looked up from his convocation. He was thrilled to play Banquo, excited for the scene where he'd be covered in blood, returning as a ghost.

The others were still reading over their letters and Tom had a frown on his face, his expression open in his disappointment. Harry assumed he hadn't gotten Macbeth, like he might have hoped, and like Harry thought initially. But, on second thought it made sense; Tom was playing Hamlet, Shakespeare's character with the most lines in his longest play—it would be mad to give Tom two lead roles in such a short space of time, if anything Dumbledore had done him a favour.

The others were starting to emerge from their envelopes, biting back grins and glancing at each other, folding up their letters dramatically and tucking them away. Tom schooled his

expression in that time, retaining only a faintly pinched look.

They continued just glancing at each other until they inevitably burst into laughter, excited laughter for what was to come. Tom though didn't share in their joy and they stopped laughing when he got up abruptly.

"What's wrong?" Theo asked, a frown replacing his bright grin.

"I'll meet you at Dumbledore's," Tom said distractedly before stalking off.

"What's up with him?" Rick asked.

"I don't think he got the part he'd been hoping for," Harry said faintly, watching Tom leave the Great Hall.

"He can't possibly expect to get the lead role," Alphard said disbelievingly, "he's playing Hamlet for God's sake why on earth would he want *more* lines."

"I don't think it's about the amount of lines—not really," Theo said, looking troubled.

— Scene eleven —

Their morning lessons with Dumbledore were slightly tense with Tom pointedly not participating. It was quite obvious that he was sulking which Harry thought was a bit dramatic seeing as though it wasn't even an entire play, only a bit of fun for Halloween. Harry still participated from beside him though, ending up in a debate about Ophelia's role in the play. He could tell that Tom was itching to give his opinion on the matter but his lips remained sealed, which was a shame; Tom always had interesting opinions.

Their lunch was just as tense. Harry thought it was quite unfair Tom's sour mood dampened everyone else's as they were all excited to start the repetitions in the afternoon, but they had to mute their happy mood in the face of Tom's bad one.

"Shall we go outside and have a smoke before the rehearsals?" Theo proposed as they all finished eating. Harry didn't much fancy being high for their first rehearsals but he was quick to agree, if only to make the afternoon even more fun.

They sat in a patch of grass against the castle's walls, passing around two joints. The sun was out, which was surprising considering the time of year, but it made the grounds look beautiful; littered with students sitting around, the lake sitting in the near distance, still as it reflected the small white clouds above. Being in good spirits, Harry's giggles came quickly. In no time at all, he and Theo were leaning against each other and laughing about nothing at all.

"It's like you've never smoked before," Rick said with a laugh as he looked at Harry.

Harry giggled again, dropping his head onto Theo's shoulder. "I've always been like this when I smoke," he said with a grin.

"Your laughter's very infectious," Alphard commented, a broad grin stretching across his lips.

"It's *impetuous*," Theo said, holding a finger up. Harry looked up at him with a frown and they just stared at each other for a second before bursting out in laughter.

"This afternoon's gonna be a nightmare with you two," Abraxas said with a smile.

"We'll be fine," Theo said as he calmed down, breathing deeply.

"We're *professionals*," Harry declared, sending them into a renewed fit of giggles. Harry managed to glance Tom's way when he heard his scoff, his eyes catching on his small smile as he looked off to the side as if to bite it back. He had a very nice smile, Harry thought.

When entering the theatre later on Harry was struck by the stark contrast from the first time he'd walked through the heavy doors. The theatre was loud with chatter, students already on stage, thumbing their books anxiously, while others bustled about between the stage and backstage. Their Professors stood before the stage chatting amongst themselves.

“There they are!” McGonagall exclaimed as she caught sight of them. “You are late!”

“It’s not even two o’clock yet, we’re not late,” Theo replied.

McGonagall glared at him. “Do *not* get cheeky with me, Mr. Nott.”

Theo bowed and said, “My apologies, my Liege.”

Harry had to turn around quickly to hide his laugh, his shoulders shaking to bite it back.

“Mr. Potter, are you quite well?” Snape asked and Harry had to turn around again, taking a deep breath as he avoided looking at Theo at all costs.

“Fine, Professor,” he said, satisfied with how level his voice was. “I was just admiring the balconies.”

It was Theo’s turn to spin around, clapping a hand over his mouth to mask his snort, forcing Harry to bite his cheeks to a painful degree to hold the laughter in. Their classmates were watching on in amusement.

“Well, it does well to be in good spirits!” Dumbledore said happily. “We shall not condemn laughter—we are in a theatre after all!”

“Yes, to play a tragedy, Albus,” Snape said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Are we doing the first read?” Alphard asked, diverting the Professors’ attention away from Harry and Theo.

“Yes, so be prepared for today’s rehearsals to be laborious,” McGonagall said with a sigh.

“What’s first read?” Harry asked curiously, looking up at Theo. They’d, thankfully, both managed to calm down.

Theo leant towards him to reply quietly. “It’s where we read the play in its entirety to get a feel of the characters and the people we’ll be working with, see how they play their characters, stuff like that.”

“Oh,” Harry said, just as quietly. “So it’s a reading basically?”

Theo nodded as he straightened back up.

“Gather around everyone!” Dumbledore said loudly. The people scattered about approached the front of the stage, hovering above them. “We will proceed with the first reading, I hope you all have your books on hand. Simply read your lines when it is your character’s turn, it does not need to be perfect, get a feel for your character, move around the stage as you wish, interact with your peers as you wish, do whatever feels right. Bring life to the words you speak, and have fun!”

“Now,” McGonagall said, “everyone exit the stage, Bernardo and Francisco be ready to enter, Marcellus and Horatio too, await your cues attentively.”

Harry dropped his bag on one of the seats, taking out his beaten up copy of *Hamlet*, before climbing up onto the stage and heading backstage with everyone else.

“Hi Harry, you’re Horatio, right?” a boy asked.

Harry blinked. “I am,” he replied with a curious smile.

“Okay, I’m Marcellus, he’s Francisco, and then Bernardo,” the boy said, pointing to the other boys beside him.

“Brilliant,” Harry said with a smile, “I’ll follow your lead then.”

The boy smiled back at him, looking down at his book anxiously.

“You can begin!” McGonagall called loudly and the boy playing Bernardo stepped out onto the stage, finding where he wanted to stand and began, Francisco following almost immediately.

Harry listened attentively, intent on not missing his cue despite how fuzzy his mind was.

FRANCISCO: *I think I hear them. Stand, ho! Who’s there?*

Harry stepped out onto the stage, the boy playing Marcellus on his heels. “*Friends to this ground*.”

It was strange playing with people he didn’t even know the names of, and he made a mental note to make the acquaintance of everyone he’d be sharing the stage with. The first scene passed easily enough, Harry knew his text well and didn’t falter when reading, though he had to bite his tongue to not laugh when Rick appeared on stage, lurking as the silent ghost of Hamlet’s father while Harry had to almost shout at him, trying to get his attention.

Theo was brilliant as King Claudius, delivering his long tirades easily with perfect intonation and pronunciation. Harry watched from the edge of the stage, engrossed in the play even though they were merely reading from their books. His concentration wavered slightly when Tom started talking though, more intent on his voice than the words he was speaking.

Tom and Theo played well together, bouncing off each other’s lines with an ease that spoke of years of working together, and their movements mirroring one another’s which spoke more of their friendship and long-term proximity.

Tom (HAMLET): [...] *But break, my heart; for I must hold my tongue*.

Harry entered, it being his cue, followed by the same two boys as earlier. “*Hail to your lordship!*”

Tom turned to him and Harry wondered how on earth he’d manage to do the play properly in December, his mind going blank under Tom’s undivided attention. He worried he wouldn’t survive their exchange, not without embarrassing himself stupidly anyway. “*I am glad to see you well: Horatio, – or do I forget myself.”*

Harry swallowed, fumbling his book for a second before shaking himself. "*The same, my lord, and your poor servant ever.*"

"*Sir, my good friend [...]*" And wasn't that ironic, coming out of Tom's mouth, Harry thought a bit bitterly. It felt a lot like when they'd danced in McGonagall's studio, *intimate* in a strange way, to exchange words that weren't theirs but that they said with their whole chest, as if they were two friends in an agitated conversation. They didn't get on that well as Tom and Harry, but maybe they could be alright as Hamlet and Horatio.

Harry got through the scene and he and Tom waited side by side just off the stage, watching Abraxas, Alphard, and Viola Carrow play their scene. Tom was watching intently and Harry found himself watching him more than the play itself, out of the corner of his eye.

When it was their turn for the next scene, Tom guided Harry onto the stage with a hand at the small of his back, and Harry, much to his despair, *stumbled* past the drawn back curtains. Tom didn't pay his lapse any mind, beginning the scene which forced Harry to recover, Tom's hand leaving his back only when he'd spoken his answering line, moving further along the stage, away from Harry.

Harry did the scene, and the next one, and before he knew it the first Act was over and he could rest, having no lines in the second Act and very few in the third. He used his time backstage well, learning the names of everyone else working in the play, chatting quietly with them as they got to know each other.

"When is the intermission?" Tom asked as he finished Act III, Scene two, which Harry had featured in for the most part.

"During the time skip after Act IV, Scene four," Harry heard Dumbledore reply.

"So late?" Tom said, disbelieving. Harry felt a twinge of sympathy, they'd already been in the theatre for the better part of two hours. Tom must have been exhausted.

Harry gave him a small smile as he arrived backstage while Theo, Gaspar, and the boy playing Guildenstern entered the stage. "At least you get the first scene in Act IV off," he said lightly.

Tom hummed. "Brilliant, one of the shortest scenes in the play, I'll really get a break," he said sarcastically.

Harry smiled up at him. "That's what you get for getting the lead."

"Do you have some water?" Tom asked instead of replying.

Harry nodded, taking the bottle he'd scavenged backstage from the chest next to them and handing it to him.

Tom drank almost the entire thing, his throat bobbing as he swallowed which was something Harry struggled to take his eyes off of. "Fuck, that's my cue," he said, handing the bottle back to Harry. "Thanks," he added quickly before entering the stage.

Harry didn't have any more scenes before the intermission so he watched silently from the sidelines. He was mesmerised during the fourth scene, where Hamlet confronts his mother and kills Polonius by error. Margaux, who played the Queen, was visibly shrinking back as Tom delivered his scathing lines. He looked genuinely mad, a flush to his cheekbones and his hair messier than it usually was. To be so authentic to a character in the first reading was more than impressive.

Harry laughed quietly as Tom dragged Abraxas's 'dead' body off the stage.

"At least I get to kill someone in this godforsaken play," Tom grumbled, holding out a hand for Abraxas to take.

"I'm glad you kill him," Harry said lightly, "he's an annoying fucking character."

"I do have to agree," Abraxas said, dusting his trousers off.

Theo came off the stage, having finished the scene where Tom didn't feature, which was actually very short. "Just three more," he said with an encouraging smile as Tom went to enter the stage, yet again. "God we would get the longest fucking play ever," he complained.

"You're doing well," Harry murmured from beside him.

"Cheers," Theo replied with a smile. "I'm *starving* though—"

"*Me too*!" Harry whispered furiously. "I feel like my stomach's caving in on itself."

"Oh thank God," Theo breathed out, "we'll go get something from the kitchen during the intermission."

"Brilliant," Harry agreed.

The last few scenes passed and Tom exited the stage with a sigh of relief as McGonagall called the intermission.

"Come on," Theo whispered, dragging Harry off back into the main room of the theatre. "I could eat a fucking horse I'm not joking."

"God, me too," Harry said, following him out of the huge doors and out into the school's hallways.

"Where the fuck are you two sneaking off to?" Tom said from behind them.

They whirled around, startled. "Shit you scared me," Theo said, clutching at his heart, "we're just going to the kitchen to eat something, we're starving."

Tom just stared at them for a second before stalking past them. "Well? What are you waiting for? We only have twenty minutes," he snapped, turning back to look at them.

Harry shared a look with Theo but they were quick to follow, almost running to the kitchens. Once they were in they had to be careful to not make too much noise or too much of a mess

seeing as though they weren't really meant to be there.

"Do they have *nothing* in this kitchen?" Theo complained, sounding devastated as he rummaged through cupboards.

"I've got a pot of Nutella!" Harry exclaimed victoriously.

Tom came over with a spoon, snatching the pot from Harry and digging in.

Harry laughed. "You got the munchies too?" he asked, taking a spoonful for himself, using the one Tom had used.

He hummed. "That's the last fucking time I'm smoking before rehearsals, I thought I was going to pass out."

"God this is *delicious*," Harry said, moaning around his spoonful. "Theo come and have some of this."

Theo emerged, grinning. "I found pickles!" he exclaimed, holding up the jar.

"Oh I could kiss you right now," Harry said with a laugh, going over and picking a pickle out of the jar Theo was presenting to him.

"That's disgusting," Tom said with a scrunched up nose.

"No they actually go really well together," Harry answered. "Or maybe I'm still high I dunno."

"Let me see," Theo said, taking a spoonful of Nutella. Harry watched him chew thoughtfully. "That's delicious actually," he declared. "Tom, you have to try."

"See!" Harry exclaimed.

Tom looked at the pickles sceptically but took one. His eyes widened the slightest amount as he chewed. "Okay it's good but we're definitely still high because that should be disgusting."

"Who cares?" Theo said. "It's hitting the spot anyway." They were silent as they demolished the Nutella and the jar of pickles.

"We'll fucking stink of pickles now," Harry said, his nose scrunched up in distaste.

"I have some chewing gum, here," Theo said, handing them both a piece.

Tom made a disgusted sound, nose scrunching up in distaste. "The mint does not compliment the dish."

Harry laughed. "I don't think we can call *that* a dish."

Tom looked down at him and laughed lightly, his expression clearing, morphing into something happy, his eyes creasing lightly at the corners, small dimples appearing in his

cheeks. Harry was struck by the fact that it was the first time he'd seen Tom laugh, something that wasn't his amused huff of breath. He was truly beautiful.

"Harry, you've got some chocolate on your bottom lip," Theo said as he wiped at his own mouth.

"Oh," Harry said, feeling a bit dazed. He lifted his hand and wiped at his lip. "Have I got it?"

Theo looked at him. "No, other side."

"Here," Tom said, hooking a finger under Harry's chin and tilting his head back. Harry stilled, drawing his own hand away, his breath stuttering as Tom rubbed at his bottom lip with his thumb, inspecting his lips before letting go and bringing his thumb to his mouth, sucking the chocolate off it.

Harry let out a shaky breath, his cheeks flaming. "Thanks," he said, sounding breathless, clearing his throat and looking away from Tom's smirk.

"Kiss it off each other next time," Theo said with an amused laugh and a suggestive smirk.

"Shut up Theo," Tom huffed, rolling his eyes.

"Piss off," Harry said, slapping a hand into Theo's stomach. He doubled over, the breath leaving him.

"Jesus Christ Harry," he wheezed. "Don't do that or you'll be seeing the pickles again."

Harry laughed. "Don't be a wanker."

"Come on, we've got to get back," Tom said, a faint smile on his face. "I wouldn't put it past McGonagall to recast us if we're late."

"Too right," Theo said, straightening back out. "What shall we do with this?" he asked, gesturing to the jars and spoon.

"Leave it," Tom said simply, "they'll never retrace the crime back to us."

Harry snorted. "I'm good with that, come on."

"Where have you three been?" McGonagall asked in her shrill voice as they reappeared by the stage.

"Just the bathroom," Theo replied easily with a shrug.

She levelled them with a look but nodded. "Get back onstage, intermission's over."

They climbed back up, retreating backstage.

"Gone for a quick threeway in the toilets?" Rick teased.

Theo sighed heavily. "Only in my fantasies, Richard," he replied dramatically.

Tom huffed. “You’re deranged,” he said, opening his book back up.

“Come on, Harry, it’s us,” Margaux said and Harry turned from where he’d been looking up at Tom.

“Shit sorry,” he said quickly when the words registered. He fumbled with his book, flicked it open to the right page and stepped out onto the stage with her and another sixth year boy.

It was Harry’s first proper scene with Theo, even though he himself didn’t have many lines, and it was a delight to play with him. The same went for Alphard who finally got back to being part of the play. They worked well together despite Harry spending most of the scene off to the side with his arms crossed across his chest, listening to their exchange intently.

Tom had a long break as Hamlet didn’t reappear for the rest of the fourth Act, though Harry could see him watching them intently from backstage. When they started Act five and it was their turn to enter together, Tom once again placed his hand on his lower back, though Harry didn’t stumble this time around.

The last Act was brilliant. Harry had more lines, getting the chance to see how he worked with Tom, Theo, and Alphard all together. They bounced off each other well. Though the scenes he shared with only Tom were suffocating in their intensity, their dialogue fast-paced and their occupation of the stage whole.

When they were interrupted by the boy playing Osric though, Harry could feel that their acting wasn’t on point. It was a scene where Hamlet and Horatio share in casual camaraderie, mockery of this strange gentleman. It was an intimate scene for it spoke of their intense and close friendship, and Harry could feel that they didn’t get it quite right. It was a relief when Theo, Alphard, and the others entered for the last action.

Tom and Alphard didn’t fight like they would in the real production, merely pretending to with vague movements.

Hamlet’s death was difficult for Harry because if they were really playing he’d have to be overcome with emotion, it was strange to merely read the lines back and forth. He still sank to his knees beside Tom who was ‘dying’ though, although the scene lost some of its drama with him laying flat on his back, holding his book above his face. Harry wanted to smile but he managed to bite it back.

Harry (HORATIO): *Now cracks a Noble heart. Good night, sweet Prince:*
And flights of angels sing thee to rest!

That part though, Harry nailed. He was knelt beside Tom who was, for all means and purposes, dead, and his voice was feeble, strained as he pronounced the words, his fingertips touching upon the curl of Tom’s hair that lay across his forehead. Maybe he used the opportunity to just admire Tom openly, maybe he was just a brilliant actor—it was nobody's business.

The end of the play passed quickly with Harry and Rick holding the last piece of dialogue. They were meant to drag the ‘dead bodies’ offstage but thankfully the others just stood up by

themselves, dusting their clothes off.

The Professors applauded politely from their seats in the front row and Theo dragged them all into a dramatic bow which made them all laugh. Harry was shattered, the day having proved more exhausting than he'd anticipated.

"Very good," Dumbledore said happily. "A very commendable effort for a first reading. I know you are all very tired, Mr. Riddle in particular I'm sure," Tom nodded from beside Harry, dipping his head minutely, "so we will make haste in giving our feedback. Sixth years first I believe, Minerva, if you will."

Harry listened as McGonagall gave the sixth years individual feedback for each of their roles and cringed when she was being harsh. Margaux was commended for her scene with Tom though, the one where Abraxas died, to which she said, "I was genuinely very scared," which earned a few laughs. Tom smirked.

"Now, the seventh years," Snape said, stepping up and taking McGonagall's place. "First, Mr. Lestrange, your performance as the Ghost of Hamlet was very good, your tirade delivered well. However, you must find a way to make the characters of the Ghost and Fortinbras feel different, despite them both being played by you, or it will cause confusion amongst the audience."

"Okay, I'll see what I can do," Rick answered.

"See that you do," Snape drawled. "Mr. Avery, you must further capture the essence of your character; you are trying to trick Hamlet into trusting you, and while your genuine care is good, it is too much and overshadows the ruse."

"Thank you, Professor," Gaspar replied easily.

"Mr. Malfoy, find a way to make your character even more insufferable, I'm sure you can manage it," Snape said with a pointed look.

"More drama?" Abraxas asked.

"More drama," Snape echoed with a nod. "Mr. Black, I am aware this is not the usual type of character you play, however, you must give Laertes the life he has in text. He is a strong and intense character, you must be that."

"I'll do my best," Alphard said with a self-conscious nod.

"Mr. Nott—"

"Let me handle this one, Severus, if you will," McGonagall said, stepping back up while Snape shrank back with an amused smile.

"Oh God," Theo mumbled from beside Harry.

"Mr. Nott," McGonagall declared, standing in front of him, her eyes hard. "If you slouch one more time on this stage, so help me God you will invoke my wrath."

Theo straightened his back out immediately, swallowing heavily. “Sorry,” he said faintly.

“You are playing a King!” she exclaimed. “Act like one, a King does not slouch! He is tall and strong, not this wheezy lanky mess of eyebags and messy hair who looks like he has just tumbled out of bed!”

Theo hung his head. “Yes, Professor,” he mumbled. Harry was biting his cheeks to not laugh. He caught Tom’s eye as he turned to look away from Theo and they both looked down quickly, Tom clearing his throat of laughter. Harry thought it was a shame he didn’t get to hear the sound of it.

“Good,” she said, softening. “Aside from that, your delivery was impeccable, you captured the essence of your character very well.”

“Thank you,” Theo said, sounding relieved.

“Now, Mr. Potter,” Snape said, stepping back up. Harry straightened out, looking up at the man somewhat anxiously. “Your delivery is impeccable *except* for when you are in a scene with Hamlet, why is that?”

“Er—I’m just not used to playing with Tom, I suppose,” Harry replied, feeling his cheekbones burn. “They’re quite intense scenes and I kind of lost focus sometimes, dropping the character. So, my delivery was a bit rubbish when it was just me reading the lines, instead of Horatio.”

Snape passed an appraising look over him. “I see, and this will correct itself over time?”

“Of course,” Harry said quickly.

“You are forgetting, Severus,” Dumbledore said suddenly, “the instances in which Harry played the part perfectly, with Tom. The potential is there, I do not worry for Harry’s performance.”

“You are referring to the last scene, I assume, Albus?” Snape said. “After Hamlet’s death?”

“Indeed I am,” Dumbledore replied with a smile.

“He’s right,” Snape said, turning back to Harry. “What you did with Horatio’s pain was perfect, lean into that.”

“Consider the nature of Horatio and Hamlet’s relationship,” Dumbledore said, stepping up with a thoughtful expression. “In the midst of Hamlet’s turmoil, there is one person he trusts, one person he relies on, and that is Horatio. Their relationship, while debatable, is, at its core, an intimate friendship, with absolute trust and devotion between them both. You, Tom, captured this well at times, as did you, Harry, like Professor Snape mentioned. However, at other times, your dialogue was stilted, as if it were Hamlet and any other character.”

“I agree,” Tom said, surprising Harry. “I could feel it, and I’m sure Harry could too.”

“I would argue they are the trickiest to portray on stage together,” Dumbledore continued, nodding in Tom’s direction. “However you did it well, the casual touches, casual *intimacy*, if you will, is the essence of their relationship. A casual trust. The hand on the back,” he said, to Tom, “and the forehead touch,” he turned to Harry, “are things you need to bring out throughout the play.”

Harry nodded, still feeling flushed.

“Horatio is the only person Hamlet would initiate contact with,” Dumbledore added. “He does with Ophelia too, but we can argue that that is merely for show of madness. No, the physical contact between Hamlet and Horatio is private, it is not the performance with Ophelia and it is not the fights with Laertes.”

“But it has to remain subtle?” Tom asked, not a trace of embarrassment on his face. “Because this isn’t a romance centric play, we just imply it by conveying casual intimacy that Hamlet doesn’t have with any other characters?”

“Correct,” Dumbledore said with a smile. “Whether you choose to interpret that as romance or mere friendship is up to you, as the audience will interpret it as they wish. However, it is a primordial part of their dynamic.”

“Okay, thank you, Professor,” Harry said, shaking the embarrassment from himself. He didn’t dare look at Tom though. Dumbledore smiled and stepped back.

“And Mr. Riddle,” Snape said happily enough. “Impeccable, I have nothing more to say really. I am sure you already know anyway. You have seen how tiring it is though, how demanding the role is, and while it may have come as a bit of a bad surprise, I’m sure you will adapt accordingly.”

“Indeed, Professor,” Tom replied. When Harry dared glance up at him, he did look tired, his cheeks holding a small flush of exhaustion.

“Very well,” Dumbledore said, clapping his hands once. “I’m sure you will all take into account our feedback and put on a performance worthy of the play. We will see you again tomorrow for further rehearsals. Goodnight to you all.”

Dismissed, Harry grabbed his things and walked back to the chapel with the others, a small smile on his face after a successful day.

— Scene twelve —

As the weeks wore on Harry grew more and more comfortable in the midst of his classmates. They spent their evenings together, chatting and drinking, going over coursework together or helping each other practice scenes from *Hamlet*.

Harry had not forgotten *Macbeth* though, and he went to his costume fitting on the 18th and learnt his lines in private, focusing more on that than *Hamlet* in the lead up to Halloween. It was good that he had this distraction, because Halloween was always difficult for him, the anniversary of his parents' deaths rubbing salt in the old wound.

He always worried for Sirius at this time of the year too, as he did in August (the anniversary of Regulus's death), but Harry managed to not think about it too much, so busy with *everything* to do with his new school. He did keep up with Sirius though, ringing him once a week or so. He'd rang Ron and Hermione too and they'd been thrilled to hear from him, taking the chapel's number gratefully for when they'd want to ring him. They promised to make the time to come to the December play which made Harry's heart melt a bit, making him realise that he missed his best friends dearly.

Over the two months of September and October, Harry had grown more comfortable with playing alongside Tom on stage. They took Dumbledore's suggestions into account and leant into Horatio and Hamlet's intimacy with an ease that should have been alarming, had Harry not already realised he was harbouring a bit of a crush on Tom Riddle.

It was just like he'd said in Snape's lesson : he was just attracted to someone who disliked him. A very handsome and tall and charismatic boy who happened to dislike him—it was inevitable Harry would be attracted to him, he was only human. He held no false hope though, it was just a silly crush and it was most definitely not reciprocated. He wasn't even sure if Tom actively disliked him anyway, perhaps he was just like that—cold, distant, a bit of a stick up his arse. Whatever it was, the brooding-mysterious-persona was definitely doing it for Harry. He kept it secret though, maintaining a healthy distance with Tom.

While he could definitely call the other five boys his friends, what Tom had said to him on that first evening stuck with him, and, true to his word, he and Tom were not friends. They got on accordingly though, their interpretations of Hamlet and Horatio, and their interactions, getting better and more natural with every rehearsal that passed. Harry really believed he'd grasped the nature of Horatio's character and felt more confident getting onstage with his classmates, acting in not just a reading, but a real performance of his character.

But, while *Hamlet* occupied most of Harry's mind during that time, the 31st of October came quickly and, before he knew it, it was the morning of the play and he was sharing excited—yet suspicious—looks with his classmates all throughout the day. Only Tom wasn't in good spirits, retaining a pinched look that didn't bode well for the general atmosphere amongst them all.

The rest of the student body seemed anxious for the evening's activities too. Stares and whispers followed them through the hallways of the castle. The seven of them were

distracted throughout the day, often staring off into space in the middle of a conversation, and Harry could just see their lines for *Macbeth* passing at the forefront of their minds. It would've been extremely funny, if only he hadn't been doing the exact same thing, nerves and excitement battling it out in his stomach.

The evening in the chapel was spent in tense silence, everyone going their separate ways and muttering under their breaths. Tom holed himself up in his room and none of them saw him after lessons—Harry worried he wouldn't even show up. No one proposed getting a takeaway, it was an unspoken agreement that they were to keep to themselves until the play.

As half eleven came and Alphard left the chapel, Harry got his Banquo costume on and made his way out of the building, skirting along the forest, up to the cabin by the lake. It was dark and quiet, only the rustle of the leaves in the autumn breeze and the sound of Harry's footsteps making noise. He hid behind the cabin and peeked around the corner, noticing the entire school gathered before the beach; a sandy area on one side of the lake that Harry assumed they were to use as a stage.

He spun around as a branch snapped behind him, his heart racing.

"It's just me," Theo whispered, emerging from the trees. "Brilliant, I wondered if you'd be my Banquo."

Harry laughed, relieved. "You're Macbeth?"

"Why so shocked, Harry?"

"I'm not," Harry said, knocking Theo's shoulder lightly. "I was just making an observation."

"I wonder who Tom is," Theo said pensively. "I thought he might be Banquo."

"Disappointed?" Harry teased.

"No 'course not, I just hope he's not too disappointed, I can't think who he'd get. I don't think he's ever not gotten the lead."

"Oh," Harry said faintly. Just then the clocktower in the castle struck twelve and a bonfire Harry had failed to notice until that moment roared to life on the beach.

Theo gripped his arm excitedly as they hovered near the cabin, pointing at the water where the surface was moving, a dark shape nearing the shore. "The witches," he whispered in Harry's ear at his frown of confusion.

They watched attentively as the figure moved forth before coming to a halt. Three smaller figures, clad in white, emerged from the water, and Harry's jaw dropped.

"Don't laugh, don't laugh, oh my god," Theo said hysterically, staring at Harry with wide eyes.

Harry was *trying* not to laugh, he couldn't imagine a worse person to be with in that moment. Walking up the beach, clad in white, soaked to the bone, were Abraxas, Alphard, and Gaspar.

Their hair, all various lengths of *long*, was plastered to their backs and framing their faces. Their heads were bent low, hidden from the public.

Clearly Harry had misjudged the production value of this play because, *somehow,* a beam of lightning shone down across the beach while a sound system made thunder rumble loudly, startling the students watching from the sand.

"*When shall we three meet again?*" Alphard asked, his voice ringing across the expanse of water as he lifted his head minutely, his hair falling back. "*In thunder, lightning, or in rain*?"

Abraxas turned abruptly, his movements elegant but somehow malicious. "*When the hurly-burly's done, / When the battle's lost and won,"* he answered easily, poison dripping from his words.

"*That will be ere the set of sun,*" Gaspar said, his voice carrying over to where Harry and Theo were watching attentively, no longer on the brink of laughter.

A drum sounded out in the distance, catching the three boys' attention. The lakeside was silent, intent on the performance being put on.

Abraxas looked over to where Harry and Theo were standing, surprising them. "*A drum, a drum! Macbeth doth come.*"

"Come on," Theo whispered to Harry, leading him along the outskirts of the forest again, nearing the beach, just off of the spotlight in the shadows where the crowd could not see them.

While they moved the witches joined hands and chanted:
ALL: "*The weird sisters, hand in hand,*
Posters of the sea and land,
Thus do go, about, about,
Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
And thrice again to make up nine."

They pushed their joined hands up towards the sky and looked up. "*Peace!*" Alphard said. "*The charm's wound up.*"

"That's my cue," Theo whispered furiously, straightening himself out quickly and stepping into the light, Harry on his heels. As the crowd turned towards them, Theo said, "*So foul and fair a day I have not seen.*"

"*How far is 't called to Forres? —What are these,*" Harry answered, stepping before Theo as if to shield him.
"So withered, and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' Earth
And yet are on 't?—Live you? Or are you aught
That man may question? You seem to understand me
By each at once her choppy finger laying
Upon her skinny lips. You should be women,

And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so."

Theo regarded the witches for a second. "*Speak if you can. What are you?*"

Alphard and Abraxas sank to their knees, bowing extravagantly before Theo.

"*All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!*" Alphard said.

"*All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!*" Abraxas exclaimed.

Gaspar remained off to the side, sounding bored as he said, "*All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!*"

Harry walked around them, regarding them coolly before looking back up at Theo and marching up to him with purpose.
"*Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear*
Things that do sound so fair?—I' th' name of truth,
Are you fantastical, or that indeed
Which outwardly you show? My noble partner
You greet with present grace and great prediction
Of noble having and of royal hope,
That he seems rapt withal. To me you speak not.
If you can look into the seeds of time
And say which grain will grow and which will not,
Speak, then, to me, who neither beg nor fear
Your favors nor your hate."

Harry was truly surprised at how well he was doing, his lines rolling off his tongue easily and his body moving in tandem, interacting with his environment and his friends. He was always better during the real production than during practice runs.

Alphard and Abraxas stood up quickly, startling Harry into taking a few steps back as they advanced on him.

"*Hail*!" Alphard exclaimed, Abraxas and Gaspar echoing him. Alphard was uncomfortably close to him, getting right in his face. He touched Harry's cheek, tilted his chin back and ran his fingers along his ribs. Harry tried not to shiver under the touch. "*Lesser than Macbeth and greater*."

Abraxas tapped his arm, as if inspecting him. "*Not so happy, yet much happier*."

Gaspar stood off to the side, looking Harry up and down. "*Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none. / So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!*"

Alphard let go of Harry suddenly and exclaimed, "*Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!*"

Harry wrenched his attention away from the witches retreating off him, and looked up at Theo.

"*Stay, you imperfect speakers. Tell me more,"* he demanded, coming to stand back next to Harry who had ended up on the other side of the witches. "*By Sinel's death I know I am Thane of Glamis. / But how of Cawdor? The Thane of Cawdor lives / A prosperous gentleman, and to be king / Stands not within the prospect of belief, / No more than to be Cawdor. Say from whence / You owe this strange intelligence or why / Upon this blasted heath you stop our way / With such prophetic greeting. Speak, I charge you.*"

Despite Theo being very convincing in his speech, the other boys only smiled at them, an eerie smile, as they slunk back into the water, disappearing into the dark abyss. They watched them go before Theo turned back to Harry and said, "*Your children shall be kings."*

"*You shall be king*," Harry replied immediately, turning his full attention back on Theo.

Theo hummed. "*And Thane of Cawdor too. Went it not so?"*

"*To the selfsame tune of words*," Harry answered. His head snapped towards the trees by the beach where rustling could be heard. "*Who's here?*"

Two sixth year boys emerged from the trees, looking giddy despite their commitment to their characters. Harry smiled at them quickly and the rest of the scene played out easily. The two boys playing Ross and Angus exited at the same time as Harry, following him over to the trees.

They bid him good luck as they'd finished their performance and Harry returned to the cabin, watching Theo finish his scene. He did well, playing a very convincing Macbeth. Harry kept an eye on the water, still in the night. He wondered briefly if the other boys were cold and felt a twinge of sympathy, Alphard had looked a bit blue around the lips when they'd played together. He was sure McGonagall would've called him 'corpse-like' again.

"What's next?" Harry asked in a whisper as Theo arrived next to the cabin with him. The audience were waiting anxiously for the next scene to start.

"I think—oh god," Theo murmured, pressing up against Harry to watch around the corner of the shed.

"What?" Harry asked, looking between the water and Theo.

"*Hecate*," Theo breathed out, a sort of understanding dawning in his eyes. Harry blinked, confused, but Theo's word had acted as a summons of sorts, and no sooner had the word left his lips that the calm surface of the water erupted in ripples, the audience shrieking in surprise.

Harry's jaw dropped, his mouth going completely dry as Tom emerged from the shallow water, shirtless and dripping water, his hair hanging in loose curls around his face. Harry was completely baffled as Tom threw his head back and howled up at the sky, his back arching and his neck curving.

"Oh god," Harry murmured against his will, leaning heavily against the shed, Theo on his other side.

The other boys emerged from the water again, circling Tom uneasily.

"*Why how now, Hecate, you looke angerly!*" Alphard exclaimed, but no sooner had he said the words that Tom had lashed out, gripping him by the back of the neck harshly, the water rippling around them.

"*Have I not reason, beldoms as you are?"* he snarled and Harry could not take his eyes off him. When playing Hamlet Tom was cool and composed, for the most part, lively for some of the more emotional scenes. Never was he this cruel and scathing person, who spat his words as if they were poison, taking up the space with his menacing presence. Harry had never been so attracted to him.

"*Saucy and overbold, how did you dare / To trade and traffic with Macbeth / In riddles and affairs of death?*" Tom continued, glaring at the witches, still holding Alphard by the scruff of his neck. The other boys shrank in on themselves. Tom went on with his tirade, spitting the words with all the poison in the world.

"*Harry*," Theo whispered urgently, tugging at his sleeve.

Harry blinked, wholly incapable of taking his eyes off Tom. "What?" he replied absentmindedly, his mouth barely moving around the word.

"*Blood-bolter'd Banquo smiles upon me*."

The words acted like a cold bath down Harry's spine and he snapped up straight. "Oh *shit*!" he exclaimed, somewhat loudly.

Theo laughed. "Come on!" He pushed Harry into the shed, uncovering the buckets of their lids, looking into each one. "Take your shirt off, quick."

Harry struggled with his shirt, knocking his glasses off in the process, his mind still fixed on the image of Tom in the water. "Fuck—Theo, *help*!" he said desperately.

"I've got you—I've got you," Theo said, laughing around his words. He batted Harry's hands away and helped him out of his shirt. "What about your trousers?"

"I'm not going out there fucking naked," Harry said, kicking his shoes off and pulling his socks off.

"Fair enough," Theo said with a laugh, kneeling down before Harry and rolling the pants up to his knees. "Looks better like that."

"Cheers," Harry said breathlessly, holding a hand out to help him up.

Theo grabbed the bucket of blood—that *stank*, Harry really didn't want to know what it actually was—and said, "Okay, close your mouth."

Harry did as told, closing his mouth and eyes as he braced himself for impact. The blood poured over him like a gloopy and heavy blanket, sticking to him like a second skin. He coughed as he took his first breath, the smell hitting him in revolting waves. "Oh god."

Theo hummed, putting the bucket down and spreading the blood all around Harry's chest and arms and back, raking his fingers through his hair. "Glasses or no glasses?"

"Definitely no," Harry replied, wiping at the corner of his eyes to keep the blood out.

"Can you see?" Theo asked, still making the blood look more and more realistic.

"Er—kind of," Harry said absentmindedly. "God I hope I don't fall in the water by accident."

"Do you want me to take you to the edge of the bridge?" Theo proposed. "We'll have to be quick though I don't know how much time we have left."

"We don't have time," Harry said urgently. "We have to go now, come on, I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," Harry huffed, ushering Theo out of the shed. "How do I look?"

"Fucking incredible," Theo said with a grin. "Good luck then, I'll see you later."

"You too," Harry said before setting off in the opposite direction. There was a bridge that crossed the lake near the shore of the beach and he hovered in the darkness by its barrier. The witches were still on the beach, as was Tom, though he only had a few lines. He was no less mesmerising for it though.

The witches shrieked and chanted around Theo as he appeared onstage again, their dialogue intense and hysterical, punctuated by Alphard, Abraxas, and Gaspar throwing powder on the bonfire every once in a while that caused small explosions.

Apparently, Richard had been cast as the apparitions, his loud voice booming out over the clearing though Harry could not lay eyes on him. Theo was visibly startled, looking around anxiously, but he regained his composure enough to say his lines, cutting off whenever Rick spoke over him.

Eight cloaked figures appeared from different points around the beach—from the audience, the sidelines, the treeline—and descended onto the beach, their auras menacing. Harry crawled up onto the bridge, sensing his cue would come very soon. He made sure to remain hidden in the shadows and partially hidden by the bridge's barrier, remaining in a crouch as he got to the centre.

Theo looked on in wide-eyed horror, stumbling back. "*What, will the line stretch out to the crack of doom*?"

Lights shone near the bridge and Harry sprang up. The audience gasped while those on the beach looked on with wide eyes, delight covering every inch of their expressions. He could feel the blood sticking to his skin, limiting his movements, while his hair itched horribly. The people were a bit of a blur without his glasses but Harry did his best to stand tall and menacing.

"*Horrible sight*," Theo said, looking aghast, though Harry suspected he was over the moon.

Harry leant against the barrier, looming above them all. He brought his hand into the air and pointed at the cloaked figures.

"*Now I see 'tis true, / For the blood-boltered Banquo smiles upon me / And points at them for his.*" Theo recited and Harry brought his hand back down, the cloaked figures melting back into the surrounding area as if they had never existed. "*What, is this so*?"

Theo's attention was wrenched away by the witches and Harry remained on the bridge, haunting over the scene. The witches resumed their chanting and riddles around the fire. Gaspar reclaimed a bowl hidden in the sand and upended it when the witches' chanting came to an end. Black smoke appeared in a loud bang, covering the beach, and Harry rushed off of the bridge, understanding that the play had come to an end.

He could hear the cheering and laughter from the shore as he breathed heavily, blinking against the blurriness of not having his glasses. Applause came next and when Harry could see his friends on the beach accepting the cheers, he climbed back onto the bridge, newly lit properly, scratching at his head, itching to get the blood out.

The applause redoubled and Harry grinned, waving out at the spectators before he climbed onto the barrier, many cheers egging him on, and jumped into the water below.

The water was *freezing* but it relieved his sticky skin from its bloody confines. He was quick to come up for air, swimming across the small part of the lake to get to the beach.

"Harry!" Alphard exclaimed as he got to the shallow end, digging his feet into the sand.

"It's *freez*—oof!" Harry didn't get to finish his thought because Alphard tackled him right back into the water to the sound of laughter from the audience. Harry came up spluttering. He laughed, steadying himself against Alphard's shoulders. "Wanker," he huffed.

Alphard laughed, reaching up to undo a clump of blood stuck in Harry's hair. "You were brilliant! Scared the shit out of me!"

"So were you!" Harry exclaimed. "All three of you were incredible! I couldn't believe it."

Alphard grinned, as did Abraxas and Gaspar who had dipped their feet back in the water, reluctant to get all the way back in like Harry and Alphard had done.

"Come on, get out of there, I've got your glasses for you," Theo said with a grin of his own, pulling Harry's glasses out of his pocket and holding them up.

Harry waded over to the beach, letting Theo slip his glasses back on his nose and heading up to join in the party already raging further in the sand. "Where're Tom and Rick?" Harry asked.

"Rick's off bragging to some sixth years," Abraxas said with a grin.

"And Tom's sulking, I'd assume," Theo said, grabbing a cup and filling it with a bottle of whiskey standing on a small table.

Harry did the same, getting a cup for himself, trying to scan the sea of people for any sign of Tom. “He was brilliant though,” Harry said absentmindedly. “I don’t see why he’d be sulking.”

“He had, like, the least lines out of all of us,” Theo said with a shrug, watching as Gaspar was dragged into a conversation with the boy playing Guildenstern.

“Yeah but I’d argue he gave the best performance, who cares about the number of lines?” Harry replied, frowning. He passed a hand through his hair, trying to stop it from dripping into his eyes. His hand came back stained red from the remnants of blood stuck in his hair.

“Tom does,” Theo said simply, shrugging his shoulders. “He’s over there, by the fire. You’re welcome to go and have a word with him if you want.”

Harry poured himself another whiskey and took a sip, letting the extra measure of alcohol make the decision for him. “Yeah, go on, I’ll go and have a word.”

“Good luck, Harry,” Alphard said, tapping his shoulder.

“It’s your funeral,” Theo said with an odd look.

Harry smiled before leaving their small group. It took significantly longer than he’d have anticipated to get over to the fire as he was stopped many times by people wanting to congratulate him or ask questions about the blood, or simply make conversation. One girl definitely flirted with him but he managed to let her down gently.

He ended up downing two more drinks before getting to Tom, having been stopped by Rick trying to impress a gaggle of sixth year art student girls. He’d forced Harry to recount his own experience of *Macbeth* in detail, if only to give him an opening to chatter on more about his own experience.

But Harry did, eventually, get to Tom. He was sat on a makeshift bench by the fire, cradling a drink of his own whilst he stared into the flames. He was still shirtless from what Harry could see, only he had a blanket wrapped around his shoulders.

“Hi,” Harry said brightly, sitting down beside him on the bench.

Tom didn’t startle, per se, but he looked taken aback. “Potter,” he said, more a statement than a greeting, his lip curled in a frown.

“You must be freezing,” Harry commented. “I’ve no idea how you stayed in that water so long. Look, your lips are blue!”

Tom looked over at him, his frown morphing into confusion more than annoyance. “Yeah, treading water for an hour in the cold can do that.”

“It was worth it though, right?” Harry said with a grin, knocking his elbow into Tom’s, emboldened by the whiskey.

Tom scoffed, pulling the blanket closer to his collarbones. “Hardly.”

“You’re kidding?” Harry said, turning wide eyes on him, acutely aware that he himself was still shirtless—and still *wet*, somehow. Tom only raised an eyebrow in question. “I’d say it was worth it, that’s the best performance I’ve ever seen you give!”

“Do not mock me,” Tom said with a scoff, looking genuinely put out.

“I’m not,” Harry said quickly, setting a hand on Tom’s arm, worried he’d leave. “I promise I’m not, I was completely mesmerised by you.” Maybe he needed to tone the truth down a bit.

It worked though, and Tom turned to look at him again, an odd glimmer in his eyes. “You don’t think I deserved better?” he asked, his voice uncharacteristically quiet.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked with a frown of his own. “I don’t see how you could’ve done better.”

“I mean the role—a better role,” Tom snapped impatiently, his voice still quiet.

“I think Hecate was the best role you could’ve gotten,” Harry said honestly, and Tom rolled his eyes. “I’m not kidding, Tom,” he pressed. “If anything, your performance of Hecate outdid anything you could’ve done as Macbeth, it was exciting, new, and incredibly impressive. You made a bigger impression in your short performance than you would’ve done as Macbeth because his character would’ve been nothing new for you.”

Tom studied him for a second, his eyes roaming all over Harry’s face as if searching for a lie.

“Plus,” Harry continued, “you’re literally playing Hamlet, consider it a blessing to get a character with fewer lines than the lead. It’s no fun if you just play the lead every single time, side characters can be a lot of fun to play. Look at us, I can guarantee it’s more fun to play Banquo covered in blood and appearing as a ghost, or three deranged witches, or a very wicked Hecate, or a booming voice in the distance, than Macbeth. Theo had no cool entries, no ominous reveals, he just had lines.”

“But acting isn’t meant to be *fun*,” Tom said after a bit, though it was said halfheartedly. “It’s meant to be a performance—*art*.”

Harry shrugged. “Sure, it can be. But that doesn’t mean it can’t be fun. And, you gave a brilliant performance, memorable, more so than your Macbeth would’ve been. I bet Alphard was terrified.”

The smallest smile graced Tom’s lips at that and Harry grinned. “I might have been a bit harsh.”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Harry said, looking over at the lake where Alphard was balancing on Theo’s shoulders in the water, battling Gaspar who was on Rick’s while Abraxas sat straddling a turned over canoe, seemingly arbitrating the fight. Harry laughed. “He’s definitely alright.”

“They’re mad, getting back in that water,” Tom said, his blanket slipping from one of his shoulders, revealing his pale skin.

“Are you still cold?” Harry asked lightly, wondering if it would be worth it to ask Tom if he wanted to team up to go against their friends.

“I’m alright now, I suppose,” he said, eyeing Harry quickly before downing whatever he had in his cup.

Harry bit his lip, biting back a grin. “Would you fancy going back in the water?”

“What?” Tom said, giving Harry a look. “You want me to carry you on my shoulders?”

Harry knew he was blushing but he shrugged. “Why not, could be fun.”

Tom looked down at his hands, a smile pulling at his lips. “You know I’m averse to fun.”

Harry laughed, getting up. “You’re not, you just think you are. Come on, let’s destroy them.”

Tom seemed to hesitate before he shrugged the blanket from his shoulders and stood up, towering over him suddenly. Harry grinned though he was starting to wonder what on earth he’d gotten himself into. They made their way to the water and Harry downed his cup in one go before handing it to a younger year with a grateful smile, along with his glasses.

Abraxas whistled, calling the four battling boys to attention. “Do we have new contenders?” he asked with a surprised grin.

The others looked taken aback but grinned broadly as the people gathered around whistled and cheered.

“Well, well, well,” Theo said in a haughty tone, adjusting his grip on Alphard’s thighs.

Tom scoffed, uncrossing his arms. “You’re going down, Nott,” he declared, getting many cheers and *‘oh's* from the audience. “Come on, Potter,” he said, turning to Harry.

Harry swallowed nervously before going up to him, daring to set a hand on his shoulder. “Get in the water a bit so I can climb on then.”

“You had better kill them, make this humiliation mean something at least,” Tom said with an eye roll, though he was smiling lightly.

Harry grinned. “Promise,” he said, following Tom into the water.

Tom crouched down, beckoning him over and Harry hopped up, wrapping his legs around his shoulders, his heart pounding against his ribcage. Tom’s hands on his thighs were a sight and Harry had to look away, shuffling gently to get better seated, his hands in Tom’s curls.

Tom guided his feet to hook around his waist before bringing his hands back up to his thighs and standing up properly. Harry held on tight, hoping he wasn’t pulling Tom’s hair too hard.

“Alright?” Tom asked, tapping Harry’s thigh softly.

He swallowed, his muscles flexing around Tom’s head involuntarily. “Good, you?”

Tom nodded, shifting under Harry and wading further into the water to join the others. Harry was taller than any of the others atop Tom’s shoulders and he felt light, from the alcohol or from the head rush of having skin on skin contact with Tom—he had no idea.

“Ready?” Abraxas asked as they all sized each other up, grinning madly. Tom pulled on Harry’s left thigh lightly, and he hoped he understood it correctly to mean they were going for Theo and Alphard first. “Fight!” Abraxas exclaimed after a few seconds.

Harry had apparently understood correctly because he was ready as they lunged for Theo and Alphard. Tom kept one hand on Harry, pushing at Theo with the other, while Harry and Alphard were giggling in each other’s faces, trying to push the other away. It became more complicated as Rick and Gaspar got added to the mix, Harry laughing stupidly as they all pushed and pulled at each other.

“Alphie *kick him*!” Theo exclaimed for everyone to hear.

Harry didn’t think twice before leaning down and grabbing Alphard’s outstretched foot, pushing him roughly as Tom did the same to Theo, letting go of Harry briefly to do so.

They swayed dangerously as Alphard and Theo fell, Harry straightening out quickly and Tom clamping his hands back down on his thighs.

“Come on Rick!” Gaspar encouraged. “They’re in a weakened state, *attack*!”

Harry tightened his legs around Tom, bracing for impact as Gaspar grabbed ahold of him again. Rick seemed to be grabbing at Harry’s legs, trying to unhook them from Tom’s waist and Harry shrieked, trying to shake him off.

“Tom, let go!” Harry shouted as he managed to get Rick off him. Tom did as told, letting Harry’s legs go, grabbing ahold of Rick instead. Harry unhooked one foot from Tom’s waist and placed it on Rick’s chest, pushing *hard*, while he pushed Gaspar at the same time. They went down with a shout and Tom had to steady himself by holding onto Harry’s thighs tightly again.

“Boo!” Theo shouted, though he was grinning. “Cheaters!”

Rick and Gaspar came up spluttering and Harry grinned, his fingers going into Tom’s hair again though they didn’t need to. He laughed delightedly, his thighs squeezing around Tom.

“Fuck,” Rick huffed, slapping the surface of the water. “How on earth did you stay up after that?”

Harry shrugged. “We’re champions, that’s how.”

“Cheaters more like!” Theo exclaimed again, splashing water in their direction.

“Bravo to the winners!” Abraxas said happily through his laughs. The people gathered around the lake clapped happily, laughing and sharing in the happy atmosphere.

Tom tapped Harry’s thigh and he looked down, peering at him curiously. “Get down then,” he said with a smile.

Harry unthreaded his fingers from his hair and unhooked one leg from his shoulders, slipping down his side, uncomfortably conscious of how his whole front rubbed along the stretch of Tom’s body. Tom’s arm steadied him around his waist and Harry was suddenly very aware of the fact that they were both shirtless, pressed together in the water, and his breath hitched as he looked up at Tom, looking for the sand with his feet.

Tom smiled at him, and from so close up the sight was devastating. Whether it be the pull of his lips or his eyes, there was a softness to him that Harry had never seen before and it made him feel breathless, to have his strong arm wrapped around his waist, his own around his shoulders.

If it were anyone else, Harry would have kissed him.

“Well then?” Tom said, looking amused. “Are you getting down?”

Harry blinked. “Oh,” he said, laughing nervously. “I can’t actually touch the bottom here without going under.” It was true, his feet kicked uselessly under the water, searching for something they couldn’t reach.

Tom was quiet for a second before he *laughed*, the sound deep and rich, his eyes crinkling at the corners as his fingers tightened on Harry’s waist.

Harry’s breath caught, his arms wrapping around Tom just that bit tighter.

“Do you need me to carry you to safety then?” Tom asked, smirking down at him.

Harry nodded, smiling up at him. “Yes please,” he said through his hammering heart. The water was freezing but he felt like he was burning up.

Tom chuckled, shaking his head before leaning down, his hands running the length of Harry’s ribs and thighs, just shy of his arse, before holding tight and hoisting him up, wrapping his legs around his waist.

“Tom!” Harry exclaimed, his voice high pitched as he fell forward, his chest pressing against Tom’s. His feet hooked together at the small of his back as Tom’s hands went back to his waist.

“What?” Tom said, teasing, his voice deep. “I thought you wanted me to carry you.”

“I—” Harry laughed nervously, his forehead dropping to Tom’s shoulder. He couldn’t think of anything to say, too caught up on the feeling of Tom pressed so divinely against him. He couldn’t even pay attention to the wolf-whistling from their friends who had already moved back to the beach. “Thank you,” he said weakly as Tom put him down on the sand.

“You’re welcome,” Tom said, far too charming for his own good as he pinched Harry’s waist gently before stepping back with a small smile. His sour mood seemed to be over, a happiness surrounding him as he went over to Rick, bargaining a drink and a cigarette off him. Harry could only watch, feeling a few too many things for his liking.

“Well,” Theo said from beside him, having appeared seemingly out of thin air. “That was certainly something.”

“What?” Harry said feebly.

Theo eyed him, a smirk taking place on his lips. “Whatever you said to him must have worked wonders—if it had been any one of us he’d’ve just told us to fuck off.”

“Right,” Harry said faintly, feeling out of sorts.

“That or your legs wrapped around his head brightened his mood right up.”

Harry blushed bright. “No—I think I managed to compliment his performance enough to get him out of his bad mood.”

“Appealing to his ego, not a bad strategy. But that’s not all it is, he knows his performance was brilliant. I wonder if he was just happy to hear it from you,” Theo said casually, as if they were talking about the weather.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, feeling a bit choked up.

Theo grinned at him. “I’m just saying that your pretty thighs wrapped around his head might have been appealing enough to make him forget his bad mood.”

Harry made a small noise in the back of his throat, looking away from Theo quickly, his eyes landing on Tom, his broad back and shoulders on full display. Theo laughed, wrapping an arm around Harry’s shoulders in a comforting gesture.

“You’re alright, Harry,” he said, a note of fondness in his voice.

Harry just leant into him, eyes still on Tom who glanced at him from afar, his smile catching on his lips again before he turned away.

Chapter End Notes

alright first act!! tell me what you think in the comments <3

- the note letting harry know who he was playing in Macbeth is 100% taken from If We Were Villains, and the last scene with the Macbeth interpretation and the after party was also majorly taken from/inspired by the book! (It's really good btw, if you like this sort of thing you should give it a read!)

- cited in this Act (in order of appearence) : Horace by Corneille, Hernani by Victor Hugo, Hamlet by Shakespeare, & Macbeth by Shakespeare.
Also : I find my English versions as PDFs online, I only own the French versions. I reread Hamlet for this fic in French so that could affect my interpretation, and I pick the first translations I come across for the French plays.

As you can probably tell, a lot of work went into this fic lmao, so I really hope you like it so far, I absolutely adored writing it!

The next Act is coming Friday and is around 50k I think! Leave a comment and drop by on Tumblr if you want, I'll be more than happy to talk about this first Act xx

Chapter 2: Act II

Chapter Notes

hello!! A couple pieces of info to do with Act II:
- there is no more inspo from if we were villains from here on out
- the song referenced in scene 8 is actually "Thoroughfare" by Ethel Cain (my number 1 song on Spotify wrapped this year because of this fic lmao)
- this Act is 50k words and that is because the last 3 scenes are all over 10k so when you get to scene 10 know that you still have over half of the entire act to go lol

I think that's all, happy reading! x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ACT II

— Scene one —

With the Halloween play out of the way, the seventh years focused on *Hamlet* with renewed motivation, especially with the no book rehearsals starting. Harry didn't so much as think about his parents enough to be sad on Halloween, too caught up in the celebrations, the play, Tom, and the others. He did make a note to ring Sirius though at some point, to ensure he was doing alright.

The high of *Macbeth* carried them through the first very laborious off-book rehearsal of *Hamlet*.

Even Tom wasn't doing great, and his increasingly sour mood only put everyone else more on edge. That first Monday McGonagall informed them they'd be spending the entire week on the first Act and they were expected to have it down by the end of it. With November starting, the pressure was only getting worse.

Doing the first scene of the whole play was nerve-wracking and Harry felt a bit terrible for the boys playing Bernardo and Marcellus with him, they were clearly nervous and him fucking up his lines over and over again didn't help them at all.

He was standing on the stage before the other boys, doing his best to recite his lines correctly, knowing full well his acting was actually terrible. "*That can I; / At least, the whisper goes so. Our last king, / Whose image even but now appear'd to us, / Was, as you know, by Fortinbras of Norway.*" He stumbled over the words, frowning as he cut himself off once again, forgetting his next line. "*Thereto*? Sorry—line?"

McGonagall pinched the bridge of her nose. "Mr. Potter, *what* is going on?"

"Sorry, sorry," Harry said, sighing heavily. "I'm always terrible in the beginning. I promise I'll get it. Can we move onto another scene? Give other people a chance to rehearse?"

McGonagall levelled him with a look, lips pursed. "We will move onto scene two, I expect you to know your lines for when you enter. And I expect you three on stage tomorrow to deliver the first scene perfectly."

Harry hung his head. "Okay, alright. Are we allowed access to the theatre in the evening?"

"Of course," McGonagall said, nodding curtly.

"Okay, sorry guys," he said, leading the two other boys backstage while McGonagall called the others onstage. "Do you mind if we meet up tonight after dinner? Work through the first scene. I promise in the meantime I'll learn my lines."

"It's fine, Harry," Ben said kindly. "Let us know, we can meet you here tonight."

“Brilliant, thanks,” Harry smiled, going to sit in a corner to go over his lines. He kept an ear out, awaiting his cue to go onstage for the few lines he had at the end of the scene. It took at least triple the amount of time as usual for them to get to his cue and the tension on the stage was a palpable thing.

“*Hail to your lordship!*” Harry said as he walked out, bowing lightly.

“*I am glad to see you well: / Horatio, – or I do forget myself*,” Tom replied, his eyes settling on Harry, making his stomach squirm uncomfortably as it had been doing ever since Halloween a couple nights prior.

“The same, my lord, and your poor servant ever.”

Tom smiled. “*Sir, my good friend; I'll change that name with you: / And what make you from Wittenberg, Horatio? Marcellus?*”

The scene went *swimmingly*. Harry and Tom bounced off each other easily, more in character than Harry had been all day long. That was, until he messed up his longer speech. “*Goes slow and stately by them: thrice he walk'd / By their oppress'd and fear-surprised eyes, / Within his* —er, *Within his*—sorry, line?”

“*Within his truncheon's length; whilst they, distilled*,” McGonagall called back.

“Right.” Harry repeated the line, getting through the rest of that part of the scene, hoping his lapse wouldn’t affect them too much.

“O, yes, my lord; he wore his beaver up,” he said some time later, sure that they’d nailed the scene aside from his singular lapse.

“*What,*” Tom said, frowning after the word. “Er—*What, look’d he—look’d he,* fuck, line?”

“*What, look’d he frowningly*,” McGonagall said.

Tom repeated the line and Harry replied, relieved to have only one line retorts. They stumbled over the last of the scene, losing the easy flow they’d had in the beginning, and Tom had to ask for his line to be prompted two more times.

Harry left the stage before Tom and retreated to the corner he’d inhabited after the catastrophe of the first scene. Tom wasn’t far behind him, scowling and swearing under his breath, scaring some of the younger ones.

“I’ve never done such a bad run,” he said, sitting down heavily next to Harry and opening his copy of *Hamlet*.

“Honestly? Me neither, I’ve never had to call the rehearsal of a scene off,” Harry said, knocking his head back into the wall, looking up at Tom from under heavy eyelids.

“This has never happened to me before,” Tom scowled, looking genuinely harrowed.

“You’ll be fine,” Harry said easily with a small, tired smile. “I’m sure it’s just the pressure of the role. You’re probably just worried you won’t be able to remember all the lines so you mess up. You know your lines better than anybody else—you certainly know them better than me. Don’t worry, you don’t *have* to be perfect all the time.”

“What about you then?” Tom said after a small silence. “Why can’t you remember your lines?”

“Oh, I’m just shit at remembering them whilst also being a shitty actor,” Harry said, laughing lightly. “I’m usually rubbish during the first no book rehearsals, I’ll probably have to spend most of my evenings here rehearsing on my own. I don’t want to be the one to fuck up the play, you know?”

Tom hummed. “I could come with you,” he said quietly. “You know, rehearse together. I wouldn’t mind the extra revising.”

Harry turned to look at him properly. “You would?” he said, somewhat disbelievingly. “Yeah, I’d—I’d love that actually.”

Tom smiled, looking like he was going to say something else but someone called his name. He’d missed his cue. Harry smiled in sympathy, giving him a thumbs up.

— Scene two —

Harry did rehearse in the evening with the boys playing Bernardo and Marcellus, managing to get the first scene down perfectly. He did better than during the afternoon rehearsals, without the pressure of *everyone* being in the theatre. Though Tom's presence did distract him quite a bit.

They stayed later than the other two boys, wanting to go over some other scenes together. It was very intimate, sharing the stage in an empty theatre, only their voices ringing out in the silence. They worked on their characters, Harry agreeing to read other people's lines so Tom could practise some of his trickier dialogue.

They got back to the chapel past midnight, exhausted.

They still had their usual lessons in the mornings though so Harry had to wake up early to get to Snape's classroom. Everyone but Tom had had a turn in front of the class, their insecurities dissected. It was brutal and highly uncomfortable, but Harry had grown somewhat desensitised to it.

Gaspar had said that his creativity was his strong suit but he worried he was forgettable, not good enough to play any meaningful characters. Alphard had admitted to being good looking enough to catch peoples' eye but he worried his acting wasn't up to that standard, that he could never do any character justice, his personality falling flat. Rick had said that he was imposing as a person, physically or personality wise, but that that sometimes locked him in a character archetype, he worried he was too plain to be versatile. Abraxas could wholly become a character, though, much like Rick, he worried that put him in a certain box, doomed to play the same character over and over. He worried that he, himself, didn't have any character to him. Theo had said, with cool detachment, that he was versatile, that he could play any character. He worried, however, that he didn't have a real personality—that he was merely taking parts of each character he played and applying them to himself. He didn't know who he was, as a person.

They said things about themselves too, like Harry had—personal things, about family, and friends, and growing up. But he'd always tried not to listen, uncomfortable with Snape's drilling as his friends fidgeted, struggling to get the words out.

It was Tom's turn. There was a certain apprehension in the air, no one truly knowing what was to come. Harry disliked these lessons, not wanting to pry on his friends' private lives, but he couldn't help how his whole attention focused on Tom standing at the front of the classroom, his hands stuffed in his trouser pockets, looking for all the world like he was at ease. Harry doubted that was the case.

"Go ahead then Mr. Riddle," Snape said, leaning against the table, "tell us your strengths and weaknesses as a person which translate into your acting."

Tom was like a marble statue, his face perfectly crafted to let nothing show, his demeanour that of forced casualness. It was impressive. "I'm confident, I believe I can achieve anything

and make it happen," he said matter-of-factly. "But I do doubt myself, so my weakness would be that self-doubt, like every good actor should have."

It was rehearsed, fake, *an act*. Even in that moment he was acting, unwilling to drop the character of Tom Riddle he portrayed to the world. Harry itched to get a chisel and hammer and carve away at the statuesque exterior to get to the real Tom he had glimpsed only a few times. When they'd eaten Nutella in the kitchens and he made Tom laugh, when they were in the water after *Macbeth* and he laughed, when they'd rehearsed together and he'd yawned, his nose scrunching up.

Snape scoffed. "You do not experience self-doubt, Tom Riddle, not when it comes to your acting anyway. No, dig deeper."

A muscle in Tom's jaw ticked and Harry took a breath, unable to take his eyes off him. "I can be overly confident, or arrogant," he said, seemingly through gritted teeth, "it can border on hubris."

Snape hummed. "Perhaps but that is not your weakness, it could be your fatal flaw though," he said offhandedly.

"That wouldn't be my fatal flaw," Tom said, his tone waspish.

"Oh?" Snape said, looking interested. "And what would it be? As a matter of fact, what would everyone's fatal flaw be? We'll come back to you in a moment, Tom. Gaspar, tell us."

Gaspar blinked in surprise. "Er—" he said, his mind visibly whirling— "My fatal flaw?" Snape nodded impatiently. "I suppose it would probably be—maybe not laziness—but passiveness. I tend to lack ambition."

"I see," Snape said with a nod. "Alphard?"

"Cowardice," Alphard replied easily. "Or my *laisser faire* attitude."

Snape designated them all in turn, alphabetically like he had developed a tendency of doing. Rick said pride, as did Abraxas, while Theo said his excessive curiosity.

"And you, Potter?"

Harry hummed. "My fatal flaw…I suppose—I think I'd always hold onto the people I love, like, protectively, if that makes sense? I would never let anyone I love get in harm's way. So, my tragic flaw would be self-sacrifice, I think."

Snape regarded him for a second before nodding. "And you Tom?" he said, turning back to Tom who was still standing before the blackboard. "What would your fatal flaw be?"

Tom hesitated for a second, very uncharacteristic of him. "My obsessive nature over sometimes trivial things could lead me down a path that strays from my objectives that I have worked my whole life for."

Harry blinked in surprise, feeling caught out when Tom glanced at him quickly. It was a very cryptic statement to make.

“I do not believe that is a fatal flaw, not yours anyway, if anything we circle back to your pride—how you believe you *must* achieve your goals when sometimes the thing that catches your attention could be worth your while,” Snape said, looking thoughtful. Tom looked more and more uncomfortable. “So, what is your weakness, Tom Riddle?”

Tom shifted, his mask of indifference slipping, bringing to light how utterly uncomfortable and tense he truly was. “I don’t let people in and therefore cover up my true person with as many characters as I can because I don’t want people to see me, I want them to respect me.”

“And why is that?” Snape asked, unrelenting as always.

Harry couldn’t look away, even as Tom clenched his jaw, dropping the casual demeanour in favour of worrying his lip between his teeth, his eyebrows pinched in a frown. Harry could tell every word that came out of his mouth was like fire, burning everything on its way out.

“Because…” Tom hesitated again, looking off to the side, a faint flush colouring his cheekbones. He swallowed, the room was silent, more than it ever had been. “Because I can’t deal with people abandoning me and not liking me,” he said in a rush, the words falling from his lips.

“...And?” Snape prompted.

Tom’s jaw clicked shut, his defences going right back up as he crossed his arms across his chest, his eyes hardening. “I don’t want to do this anymore, I’ve said what I had to say,” he snapped.

Snape sighed. “You are one sentence away from getting there.”

“Why do I need to say it if I know what it is?”

“Because,” Snape said patiently, “your friends have all done it, show them that same level of vulnerability. They will respect you more for it.”

Harry was on the edge of his seat, feeling dirty for even watching the exchange, like some kind of voyeur to Tom’s deepest insecurities. Tom didn’t reply for a while and Snape seemed to think he just needed to wait him out. The silence stretched for at *least* a whole two minutes. But, Snape was right; Tom’s shoulders slowly lost in tension, his angry frown smoothing out, showing that same vulnerable look as before.

“I—” he started, his voice strained. He closed his mouth, huffing. His fingers were curled into his arms, bunching the fabric of his shirt up. He looked like a kid trying to hold himself together, shielding himself from the outside world. And, for the first time, Harry wondered who Tom Riddle was; where he’d come from, how he’d grown up, who his family were. Who was this small scared child behind the cruel exterior?

“I don’t believe anyone would want me or love me for who I am,” he eventually said, quietly, his voice lacking any and all bite it almost always held. His head was held high but it did nothing to dispel the fact that he’d just laid himself bare in front of all of them. It was awful and Harry couldn’t stop picturing the little boy he saw in Tom’s eyes, couldn’t look away from him.

“There we go,” Snape said, somewhat belatedly, as if he hadn’t really thought Tom would say it. “You may take your seat, Tom.”

He did not need to be told twice, stalking over to his seat next to Theo and sitting down, looking out of sorts, his eyes wide and his cheeks flushed.

The lesson went on after that but Harry couldn’t focus, his eyes straying to Tom from time to time, watching him as he stared off into space. He’d never looked so vulnerable, and Harry had a stray thought: *who wouldn’t love him like this*?

— Scene three —

“Theo?” Harry said quietly, still unsure of what he wanted to ask. They were in the chapel and it was edging on midnight. Harry had been kind of spaced out all day, the lesson with Snape from that morning not sitting right with him. He couldn’t shake the feeling of having seen *too much*, having heard *too much*. A sick part of him was glad to have been in attendance, eager to know *who* Tom Riddle was. But, the rest of him just felt *awful*.

“Yeah?” Theo prompted with a little laugh, frowning in Harry’s direction. It was just the two of them, the others having retired after a gruelling afternoon of rehearsals and Tom having locked himself in his room as soon as they got back.

“Just—er, Tom,” Harry said, cringing. He didn’t know *what* to ask.

Theo chuckled, taking a drag of the joint they’d been passing back and forth. “What about him?”

Harry made a frustrated noise. “I just—about Snape’s lesson. I suppose I just wanted to know more about him, I don’t—I know nothing about him.”

“Why don’t you ask him?” Theo said, no malice about the question, more curiosity.

Harry bit his thumb, sitting back in his seat. “We’re not friends,” he said. “He made that very clear—I don’t think he’d want me to ask anything.”

Theo tilted his head to the side curiously. “I disagree. I’d say you’re the closest thing to a friend Tom has, aside from me.”

Harry frowned. “I have friends, aside from you lot, and they act nothing like Tom towards me.”

Theo shrugged. “Tom’s a bit strange with relationships to others. I’m sure you understand why after today’s lesson. But, trust me when I say he wouldn’t go to evening rehearsals with anyone, and he wouldn’t let anyone climb on his shoulders to have a stupid fight in the lake.”

Harry felt the tips of his ears burn with a blush at the reminder, Theo’s derisive smile doing nothing to help. “Still,” he said pointedly, “I don’t think he’d want me asking about *him*.”

Theo sighed. “Maybe not, you’re right. I suppose I can only tell you what I—and everyone else—knows. And it’s not a lot.” Harry nodded, eager to hear anything and everything. “Well, he got into the school on a scholarship, the only one in our year to have done so, and we were at least thirty in first year. When he’s not at school he lives in an orphanage in London, he never knew his parents and he has no known relatives. The only exception was this summer, he came to live with me because he’d turned eighteen in December so he couldn’t go back to the orphanage.”

Harry blinked, surprised by this information. He filed it in his mind, going over every piece to not forget anything. It wasn’t a lot but it painted a picture, it unveiled part of the mystery

of who Tom Riddle was. “Oh,” he said, somewhat stupidly.

“Is that what you wanted to know?” Theo asked, leaning over the table to hand Harry the joint.

Harry took a drag. “I suppose,” he said quietly, still thoughtful. “I suppose what he said in Snape’s lesson makes a bit more sense.”

Theo hummed, tapping his fingers on the table. “I’d assume it’s very difficult growing up with no one, absolutely no one to rely on.”

“It is,” Harry replied and Theo looked over at him sharply, as if he’d forgotten who he was talking to. Harry smiled. “I mean—at least I got my parents for a time, and I always knew Sirius *did* love me, as did Remus. But I still spent time where I couldn’t rely on anyone—it’s scary, as a kid. I can’t begin to imagine how self-sufficient it made Tom, no wonder he doesn’t like people that much.”

Theo regarded him for a second, taking the joint Harry handed back. “Who’s Remus?” he asked eventually.

Harry smiled, fiddling with his fingers. “Remus Lupin—”

“The musician?” Theo asked, surprise written all over his face.

Harry nodded. “That’s the one. Well, he and Sirius have always kind of been together since school, so he was like my second Godfather. They aren’t together at the moment though, Remus struggled to look after Sirius when he got bad, and he couldn’t stand to watch him relapse over and over again.”

“Oh,” Theo said. “And are you still in contact?”

Harry nodded. “We ring each other from time to time. I’m closer to Sirius but I always loved Remus—I called him uncle Moony,” he said with a smile. “He taught me how to roll a joint.”

Theo laughed, his eyes bright. “You have had an odd life, Harry Potter.”

Harry smiled, laughing to himself. “I suppose I have.”

“Remus Lupin taught you how to roll a joint,” he mumbled to himself. “Never tell Gaspar, he’d die of envy.”

Harry snorted, grinning at him. “I wouldn’t dare.”

— Scene four —

Tom was…quiet for the rest of the week. He holed himself up in his room whenever he could. He remained present in lessons and in rehearsals though, answering questions, reciting his lines. But it was such an *act*, and Harry often wondered if he was the only one to notice, because no one said anything. It was like watching him play Tom playing Hamlet during rehearsals—it didn't make him any less good, but Harry could clearly see how drawn back he was.

He didn't speak with any of them much during that week and he didn't offer to come to the theatre with Harry in the evenings. Theo came along sometimes, as did the others, but not Tom.

"Right, we're off," Abraxas said, putting his wallet in his pocket. They were all going to the pub down in the village. With it being Saturday they thought they should get out.

"You're coming aren't you, Harry?" Alphard asked.

He nodded, reclining back in his seat at the table. "I'll meet you there though, I'm gonna give Sirius a ring, I haven't spoken to him in a while." Since before Halloween, actually. Harry felt a bit bad but he'd been *so* busy he hadn't found time to ring his Godfather.

"Shall we wait for you?" Theo proposed.

"No, it's fine," Harry said with a smile. "It'll take *ages*, Sirius'll want all the details on *Macbeth* and everything so I'll just meet you there."

Alphard snorted. "Alright then, say hello for me."

"Will do," Harry replied, getting up and following them to the door. "Is Tom not coming?"

Theo shook his head. "I asked him, says he doesn't want to."

"Oh," Harry said faintly, his eyes drifting up to where he could spot Tom's bedroom door. "I'll see you in a bit then."

"Bye bye," Theo said, grinning as he closed the door behind himself.

Harry would ring Sirius, get ready, and then go and ask Tom if he wanted to wander down to the pub with him. It wasn't healthy all the time he was spending alone.

He went to make himself another cup of coffee, still wearing nothing but comfy joggers and one of his dad's old t-shirts. He was secretly quite happy to get some time to himself, to just hang about for a while.

The long window above the whole counter space in the kitchen gave him a view of the landscape outside; grass stretching out over a little hill, the forest ahead, the sky hanging above it all, grey and cloudy. Despite the dreary weather, it made for a peaceful setting, a thin

fog covering it all. In the kitchen, it was warm and cosy thanks to the central heating, and the only sounds were that of the coffee machine and Harry's bare feet padding across the tiles as he walked around absentmindedly, grabbing a mug and putting some stray bits and bobs away while he looked out of the window, eyes trained on a magpie hopping around in the grass.

"I thought you were going with them?"

Harry jumped, his spoonful of sugar falling on the counter. He turned around to see Tom standing in the archway of the small kitchen. "Shit, you scared me," he said, swallowing around his hammering heart.

Tom raised an unimpressed eyebrow. "I can see that."

Harry cleared his throat, scowling at the sugar that he wiped up. "I am—going, I mean—I'm just gonna ring Sirius first." Tom hummed noncommittally, still leaning against the doorway. "Do you want a cup of coffee?"

"Yes," Tom replied, dry as ever.

Harry laughed lightly. "Alright, how do you take it?" he asked pointedly.

Tom didn't reply for a second, looking off to the side, as if even such a small piece of information was an excruciating part of himself to give away. Harry waited. "Two sugars, no milk," he ended up saying.

"Good to know," Harry said faintly, grabbing another mug and making Tom's coffee along with his own. While he was still in his relaxed mood, still tracking the magpie's adventure outside, he was painfully aware of Tom's eyes on his back. "Here," he said finally, handing Tom his coffee.

"Thanks."

"Do you not fancy coming to the pub?" he asked, following Tom into the library.

"No," he replied shortly.

Harry hummed, hovering by the table. "I'll go ring Sirius then, let me know if you change your mind for the pub and we can go together."

Tom hummed, looking distracted. He'd taken to scribbling in a notebook that Harry was infinitely curious about but wouldn't dare ask to see.

He sighed and left the library, walking the few steps to the phone by the kitchen. He dialled the number, pressing the phone up to his ear as he waited for Sirius to pick up, sipping his coffee. It rang three times and still Sirius didn't pick up so he tried again, feeling a tad uneasy as the rings sounded out.

Finally, the telltale sign of the phone being picked up sounded out, and Sirius greeted him with a mumbled: "*Yeah, hello?*"

“Hi,” Harry said faintly, frowning, “it’s me, Harry.”

“*Harry*,” Sirius replied, the word enunciated slowly, dragged out. “*How’re you doin’ mate?*” His words were slurred, merging into each other.

Harry pressed the phone harder to his ear, his frown deepening. “I’m alright, how are you, Sirius? Did I wake you up?”

“*M’alright*,” Sirius said faintly, as if he were half asleep.

“Are you sure?” Harry asked, concern taking hold of him.

Sirius hummed. “*Y’know how it is, c’est la vie*.”

Harry set his coffee down on the stairs. “Sirius, you’re not making much sense, have you just woken up?”

“*Can’t remember,*” Sirius said faintly, as if distracted.

Harry’s heart rate kicked up, worry pooling in his stomach. “Sirius, are you high?”

He mumbled something that Harry couldn’t understand, his breathing heavy in the receiver.

“Sirius,” Harry said, somewhat urgently, “do you need help?”

He was completely out of it, his reply nonsensical and garbled.

Harry was shaking, his breathing short. “Okay Sirius, do you want me to call an ambulance or Remus?” he asked loudly, hoping Sirius would understand. “If you don’t reply I’m going for the ambulance.”

“Moony…” Sirius replied faintly, his voice sounding far off, as if he’d dropped the phone.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, his heart hammering in his chest. “Okay,” he whispered. “Alright, Sirius just—hang in there, I’ll ring Remus, just—I love you.”

He waited for a second but no reply came and he realised there were tears in his eyes, his throat closing up. He hung up the phone, breathing heavily, his mind foggy.

“Remus, Remus,” he mumbled to himself, trying to focus, “what the fuck is his number?” He pressed his forehead to the wall trying to *think*, trying to *remember,* but it wouldn’t come. “I must have it written down somewhere,” he mumbled absentmindedly, pushing off the wall and rushing up the stairs.

He rummaged through his things, making a right mess in the process, looking for a notebook where he had a few numbers written down. He was horrendously aware of how every second was vital in this situation, trying to quell the guilt of not immediately calling an ambulance. Sirius had always told him to never do that.

When he realised his searching was pointless Harry put his head in his hands, making a strangled distressed noise, a couple tears leaking out of his eyes that he wiped away furiously. He took a deep breath and tried to focus, realising he knew where the notebook was. He grabbed it from his shelf, having no idea why he hadn't looked there in the first place.

He ran downstairs, flicking the book open as he pulled the phone off the wall.

"Come on, pick up," he murmured, his hands still shaking horribly.

Just like with Sirius, no one picked up on the first ring and Harry felt like he was going to burst out of his skin. He dialled again with shaky fingers, having to start again when he punched in the wrong number.

"*Hello?*" Remus said from the other side.

Harry fumbled the phone in his panic. "Remus? Remus, it's me, Harry."

"*Harry*!" Remus exclaimed. "*How are—*"

"Remus, it's Sirius," Harry said urgently, cutting him off impatiently. "I just rang him and he wasn't making any sense and he sounded really out of it, when I asked if he wanted me to ring an ambulance or you, he said you. Could you please go and see if he's okay?" It all came out in a rush, and Harry pressed the heel of his hand into his eyes under his glasses, trying to keep the tears and sobs at bay.

"*Okay okay,*" Remus said, alert. "*Harry, calm down, please calm down.*" Harry took a breath, wiping at his cheeks again, sniffing into the receiver. "*Of course I'll go check on him, is he at home?*"

"Yeah."

"*Alright, I'll go now. I'll call you back from there, does he have this number?*"

"Yes."

"*Okay, if you haven't heard from me in two hours, ring me there. These things can take time to deal with, especially if I have to take him to the hospital,*" Remus said, his tone reassuring.

"Okay," Harry said weakly, his voice a pitch higher than it usually was.

"*Alright, Harry, I'll catch up with you later, please don't worry too much*," Remus said before hanging up.

Harry took a shaky breath, setting the phone back on the wall. His mind was blank, his body shaking with adrenaline. He took another few quick breaths and dialled Sirius's number again, hoping to get him on the phone, make sure he was still awake while Remus got there.

He rang—once, twice, three times. There was no reply. He slammed the phone back on the wall with a frustrated sound.

“How can you not resent him?”

Harry turned; Tom was leaning against the opposite wall, watching him curiously. “What?” he said weakly.

“You said you don’t resent him—Sirius. How can you not? Has he not disappointed you time and time again?” Tom asked, his eyes never leaving him.

Harry took a shuddering breath, still having trouble focusing. “I don’t—I just don’t. Why would I?” he said shakily. He didn’t particularly want to be having this conversation.

“He is not your responsibility, in fact you are supposed to be his,” Tom said, a note of distaste in his voice. “Do you not find it disappointing? Having to worry about him, having to look after him.”

“Listen, Tom,” Harry said, rubbing at his forehead, taking a step back. “Fuck,” he swore as he stepped into something wet, he looked down, noticing he’d spilled his coffee over the stairs. “Fuck—fuck’s sake,” he said, feeling frustrated tears pooling in his eyes.

He bent down and picked the mug up, his fingers shaking so horribly it slipped from his hold, shattering against the floor. The noise made him jump, his nerves feeling like live-wires. For some reason that was the drop of water that made the vase overflow and Harry’s lip started wobbling, hot and heavy teardrops falling onto his cheeks.

“Alright,” Tom said, walking over and grasping his arm in a hold that couldn’t be called gentle. “You need to sit down.”

“I don’t—” Harry gasped, breath heaving— “I need—I need—the phone.” He pointed vaguely at the wall, his vision swimming. “Remus.”

“Harry,” Tom said sharply, “sit *down*.”

Harry’s jaw snapped shut, a small noise escaping his throat. He let Tom pull him into the library, sitting him on one of the chairs.

“Here, have a cig,” Tom said, pulling one out of his pack and propping it between Harry’s parted lips. “I’ll go and make you another coffee, just—*calm down*.”

Harry sniffed, looking up at him with wide eyes. Tom studied him for a second before nodding and leaving for the kitchen. Harry couldn’t decide if he’d looked annoyed or harrowed.

He grabbed the lighter from the table, flicking the stone repeatedly, his shaky hands hindering him from actually lighting it. He dropped it onto the table with the cigarette, frustrated, and propped his feet up on the chair, wrapping his dad’s overly large t-shirt around his knees. He steadied his breathing as he listened to Tom move about the kitchen in the other room, his head pressed to his knees, curled up on himself.

“Here,” Tom said as he reemerged, setting a cup of coffee in front of him. “Why haven’t you smoked your cigarette?”

Harry lifted his head, wondering idly how awful he must look, tear-streaked and small. “I couldn’t light it,” he said feebly, swallowing around a sob. “And thanks—for the coffee.”

Tom only picked the cigarette back up, propping it between Harry’s lips again, and flicked the lighter for him, lighting it. Harry took a grateful breath in, laying his cheek on his knee, feeling defeated.

It was silent for a while, Harry absentmindedly smoking his cigarette, his ears alert for any sound of the phone ringing, his mind stuck on the likely image of Sirius passed out on his sofa.

“You never answered my question,” Tom said. Harry turned to look at him, finding Tom already watching him intently.

“Hm? What question?” he asked, his voice small, as small as he felt, as small as he felt in the cupboard under the stairs.

“About Sirius—I asked if you found it disappointing,” he clarified.

“No,” Harry said airily, absentminded. “Why would I be disappointed?”

Tom shuffled, his chair creaking, a pinched look on his face. “Why wouldn’t you be? He’s supposed to look after you—and look at you.”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t care. I just want him to be alright.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to leave him? Let him live his life how he wants?”

Harry frowned. “Leave him behind? Cut him off?” Tom nodded, watching him curiously. “‘Course not. How would that help anyone?”

“It would help you, you wouldn’t have to worry anymore.”

Harry laughed humorlessly, a small sound. “You’re mad if you think I wouldn’t worry about him if we didn’t talk. If anything, I’d worry more.”

“Why do you worry though? He’s not your responsibility. You’re only responsible for yourself,” Tom said seriously.

Harry shook his head, still pressed to his knees. “I love him. Why on earth would I push one of the only people I have in my life away?”

“Does he deserve your love though? He abandoned you when you needed him most.”

“It’s not a question of if he deserves love or not,” Harry said incredulously. “You don’t get to decide who deserves love and who doesn’t. Everyone does. I love him and my love for him is unconditional. You don’t love someone under conditions—under the condition that they’ll treat you perfectly. When you love someone you treat them to the best of your abilities. And Sirius does his best, I could never fault him for that.”

“And if his best isn’t good enough?”

“Then I’ll still love him,” Harry said matter-of-factly.

Tom was quiet, just watching him. Harry took a drink of his coffee—two sugars, milk. Perfect.

“Do you not think people are a hindrance to your life?” Tom asked eventually.

“Never,” Harry replied. “I’ve had a taste of what being alone’s like, and life isn’t worth living like that. Not to me, anyway.”

“What if—” Tom paused, swiping his tongue over his bottom lip and looking to the side. “What if that’s all you’ve ever known?”

And suddenly they weren’t talking about Harry anymore.

Harry took a steady breath, thinking before he spoke, worried of saying the wrong thing. “Then it would be a near impossible thing to let people in, but I think you always find people who are worth the potential heartbreak or disappointment. For instance—” he figured opening up about himself might shift the vulnerability from Tom to him— “when my parents died and I went to live with my relatives I had no one—Sirius and Remus couldn’t do anything for me, I had no friends to fall back on, having moved to a different area. I was entirely alone, and I was *angry*. I hated everyone, couldn’t make friends, couldn’t let anyone come close. I just had this certainty in me that anyone I loved would die or disappear or wouldn’t love me enough to look after me.”

He swallowed, avoiding Tom’s eyes that were looking directly at him by then. He curled in on himself a bit more. “And then—” he cleared his throat as he continued— “and then I met Ron and Hermione—my best friends. I couldn’t stand them in the beginning but they persisted, intent on taking me in. And eventually I let them, once I realised that just hearing the sound of their laughter made me happy, cleared the anger away for a while. And I realised, then I think, that it was worth it. Even brief happiness was worth the potential hurt—because if you don’t take that brief happiness, you’re left with nothing but anger and resentment. And I can’t live like that.”

Tom blinked in his direction, his expression open in a way it usually wasn’t before he looked to the side abruptly. He didn’t reply, not for a while.

“What of spite?” he asked after a long stretch of silence.

“What about it?” Harry asked curiously.

“Can you not live out of spite? Achieve everything you set yourself to out of spite?” Tom said, still not looking at him.

Harry smiled. “But who are you spiting? If you have no one, no one gives a shit about your spite.” Tom’s jaw clenched and Harry sighed. “Spite can be a great motivator, when you care

about someone and want to prove something. But it's not durable—at some point you have to ask yourself, *what's the point*? And then you find there is none. What good is spite then?"

Tom opened his mouth as if to reply but closed it again, taking out a cigarette.

Harry watched him curiously, grateful that the conversation—despite its heavy undertones—had taken his mind off the situation, even for a brief period. He took another sip of his coffee, more focused on the taste that time. He frowned, a small smile pulling at his lips. "Did you put a shot of whiskey in this?"

Tom looked at him then, that vulnerable look vanishing from his eyes leaving place to a kind of awkwardness. "I thought it might help you calm down."

Harry smiled, feeling *something* he couldn't identify amidst the swirling of emotions already inside him. "Thank you," he said softly, cradling the mug between his hands.

Tom gave him something that could've been a smile or a frown—Harry wasn't sure, but he appreciated it anyway.

They returned to silence, Harry anxiously awaiting the phone call while Tom read and sometimes scribbled in his notebook. He expected him to return to his room, but he didn't. He did disappear for a few minutes, but returned with Theo's weed and rolling paper. He handed it to Harry, saying, "You roll." Harry did, happy to have something to do with his hands, and they passed it back and forth in silence.

Time passed and Harry grew more anxious by the second. When it had been two hours he sprang up from his seat, incapable of waiting any longer.

He dialled Sirius's number, listening to the phone ring while he bit his thumb, shifting his weight from foot to foot. No one picked up and he tried again, and again, and again. No one picked up. He went back to the table, dejected and feeling sick. Tom poured him a glass of whiskey as well as one for himself. They stayed silent.

The others came back three hours after leaving and Harry's anxiety only grew when he heard the door open.

"What the fuck's going on here?" Rick said as he waltzed into the library. "Why didn't you come, Harry?"

"Is everything okay?" Alphard asked, looking over Harry quickly.

"I—it's Sirius," Harry said faintly, unsure of what to say.

"What's going on?" Theo said worriedly, taking a seat next to Harry instead of his usual one next to Tom.

Harry recounted what had happened briefly, stuttering over his words under his friends' concerned gazes.

"Harry, that's awful, are you okay?" Theo asked, his eyes wide.

“I’m fine,” Harry said quickly. “I’m just—worried, and waiting for the fucking phone to ring which it was supposed to do over an hour ago.”

“Okay,” Theo said quietly, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Is—could it be—could it be life threatening?” Alphard asked, looking completely lost.

Harry shrugged, trying to dispel the lump in his throat at Alphard’s question. It was something he’d spent the better part of the last three hours trying not to think about. “It er—it could be. It depends, if he’s actually overdosed or if he’s just really high.”

“Has this happened before?” Gaspar asked quietly.

Harry nodded. “A few times.” And each one had been scarier than the last. Harry, despite being frustrated at being stuck all the way in Scotland, incapable of doing anything, was relieved to not have to see Sirius in that state again.

“Well,” Theo said after a few seconds of silence, “at least you’re not alone in the wait now. You should’ve called the pub, we’d’ve come back.”

“Am I nonexistent?” Tom asked from behind his book.

Theo gave him a look. “Oh, yes, you must’ve been so supportive. Let me guess, you’ve sat in silence for three hours?”

Tom scowled, going back to his book.

“It was fine,” Harry said, wanting to defend Tom’s efforts. “It was nice—Tom made me coffee, spiked with whiskey, and got me to calm down when I was panicking.”

Tom didn’t look up but Harry saw the way his lips twitched upwards.

It was tense in the library, the others making a forced effort to keep the conversation going. Harry missed the silence he’d shared with Tom—at least then he hadn’t had to hide the fact that he wasn’t fit for casual conversation. He retreated back into his t-shirt, his head pressed to his knees, on high alert for the sound of the phone ringing.

It must have gone on for another hour, an excruciating hour. But, finally, the phone rang.

Harry was on his feet in an instant, stumbling all the way to the hallway, catching himself on the wall to not fall, his heart hammering in his chest, adrenaline pumping through his veins. He didn’t know whether it was dread or relief pooling in his stomach.

“Remus?” he said immediately as he snatched the phone off the wall, his breathing heavy.

“*Harry*—”

“Is he alright? Is he alive?”

"*Yes*," Remus replied, and Harry sagged in relief, pressing his forehead to the wall. "*He's stable, I'm so sorry it took me so long to call. He was unresponsive when I arrived so I took him straight to the hospital. It took a while for him to get discharged, his heart rate wouldn't come back to normal but he's fine. I've just put him to bed for now, let his body rest.*"

"Oh, thank *god*," Harry said, breathless, exhausted and relieved tears pooling in his eyes. He choked on a sob.

"*Oh Harry, are you okay*?" Remus asked, his voice achingly gentle.

Harry sniffed. "I was just so *worried*," he said, sounding choked up. "I tried ringing loads but I understand. Thank you for taking care of him."

"*I'm so sorry, Harry*," Remus said quietly. "*You shouldn't have to go through this.*"

"Tell me what happened," Harry prompted through his tears.

"*He would've been okay, probably,*" Remus said, accepting the change of subject. "*It's only a suspected overdose, it was only so bad because he hasn't been taking care of himself. I got him to the hospital as soon as I could though when he remained unresponsive and they took good care of him. He was dreadfully embarrassed when he woke up—hasn't spoken much to me.*"

"He'll come around," Harry said quickly. "He wanted you, when I spoke to him he asked for you. He'll talk to you."

Remus hummed. "*I hope so, I intend to have quite a difficult chat with him tomorrow when he's hopefully feeling a bit better. I'm taking him to rehab.*"

Harry's breath caught, a wet sob racking through him. "What if he doesn't want to go?"

"*He'll go*," Remus said softly, "*for you, for me, he'll go. He needs it, Harry. He can't go on like this.*"

"I should've rang sooner," Harry said around another sob. "I should've—Halloween. I was *so* busy I just—I couldn't make the time to ring but I *should've*, I knew he wouldn't be okay—"

"*Harry*," Remus cut in sharply, "*none of this is your fault, absolutely none. And it's not your responsibility.*"

"It's not yours *either*," Harry cried, hiccups punctuating his words, the whole pressure of the day crashing down on him. "You walked away from this—for good reason, I'm sorry—"

"*Kiddo*," Remus said, his voice sounding strained. "*Breathe Harry, it's alright. I love Sirius, I always have and I always will. If he needs me I'll come and if he gets better I'll happily come back to him. I just couldn't stand by and watch him destroy himself, that's why I left. I will happily take responsibility for him if it means he can get better.*"

Harry took a shuddering breath, his forehead still pressed against the wall as he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to shut out the hurt. He startled as someone set a hand on his shoulder,

turning blurry eyes on Theo and Alphard hovering in the doorway.

“Is he okay?” Alphard asked, his own voice strained.

“He’s fine,” Harry replied, sounding choked up. “He’s back at home.”

Alphard seemed to sag in relief but Theo was looking at Harry worriedly. He didn’t say anything though, only putting an arm around his shoulders, the feel of it so reminiscent of when Ron or Hermione would do so, Harry sagged into it.

“*Listen, Harry,*” Remus said, “*I should go and check on him, will you be around tomorrow? I’m sure Sirius will want to ring you before leaving.*”

“‘Course,” Harry said, biting his lip, tears still dripping onto his cheeks, “any time.”

“*Okay good, we’ll catch up another time, alright? I want to hear all about how you’re doing at school.*”

“Okay Moony, thank you,” Harry said, struggling to hold his sobs back.

“*Don’t thank me, Harry,*” Remus said sadly. “*Love you kiddo, take care of yourself.*”

“Love you too,” Harry choked out. “Ring me if anything happens.”

“*I will do, bye bye Harry*,” Remus said, his voice awfully pained, before he hung up.

Harry bit his lip, pressing the phone back onto the wall slowly.

“Harry…” Theo said, looking beyond worried. Harry burst into tears, falling into his chest, strong arms wrapping around him immediately. “Oh God, it’s okay,” Theo murmured in his ear, holding him steadily.

“Sorry,” Harry said through his sobs, feeling a bit hysterical as he gripped Theo’s jumper in a tight hold. Grief was the one thing in life he couldn’t deal with, having never really gotten over his parents’ death. Anytime Sirius—or any of the other people Harry cared about dearly—were in life threatening situations, he panicked.

“It’s okay, you’re okay,” Theo said reassuringly,

“What’s happened? I thought Sirius was okay,” Harry heard Tom say from somewhere near the kitchen doorway, his voice drowned out by Harry’s sobs. “That’s what Alphard said.”

“He is,” Theo said quietly, still holding Harry gently, “it’s just the stress of the day, I think.” Harry nodded into his chest to confirm his statement.

“I’m really sorry,” Harry said, trying to get his breathing back in check, pulling back from Theo a bit. “Just—the waiting and knowing he was in the hospital and hearing him in that state, it’s just a bit…”

“Harrowing,” Theo supplied when Harry came up short, “stressful, upsetting. It’s alright, Harry. No one’s going to blame you for getting upset about something like this.” Theo pushed him back a bit, taking his face in his hands, smiling down at him kindly. “You’re a pretty cryer too, who would've guessed?”

Harry laughed lightly, the sound turning into a sob halfway through.

“Alphard asked for you,” Tom said suddenly.

“What?” Theo said, looking confused. “Me?”

“Yeah, you should go and see what he wants,” Tom replied.

Theo frowned, his hands dropping from Harry’s face. “Will you be okay?” he asked gently, running a thumb across Harry’s cheek.

“Yeah,” Harry replied quickly, sniffing and wiping at his cheeks. “Thank you, that was a brilliant hug.”

Theo grinned. “Best compliment ever,” he said before pulling back, looking over his shoulder at him quickly as he left for the library.

Harry took a deep breath as he disappeared, wiping at his eyes under his glasses.

“Are you okay?” Tom asked, a frown on his face.

“Yeah,” Harry replied, his voice stuffy and choked off. “Just—relieved and sad, I suppose.”

“Why?”

“Remus is gonna send him to rehab, tomorrow. I just—I know it’ll be difficult for him,” Harry said, biting at his thumb.

Tom took a step forward, seeming to hover a bit, as if hesitating. He arrived in front of Harry, forcing him to tilt his chin back to look at him properly. There was a pretty smattering of pink across his cheekbones, and before he knew what was happening, Tom was holding his face in his hands, wiping the tear tracks away gently.

Harry’s breath stuttered, his eyes raking over Tom’s face; his focused eyes, intent on him, the small freckles, almost imperceptible, that ran across the bridge of his nose, how crooked his nose was.

“You are pretty when you cry,” Tom murmured, giving him a small smile.

Harry felt like he might collapse, his hand reaching out and scrunching up Tom’s t-shirt, grappling for purchase as he swayed in his hold.

Tom’s thumb brushed across his bottom lip and Harry took in a sharp breath. Tom’s eyes tracked the movement but he blinked a second later, stepping back again. “I’m glad he’s okay,” he said, not quite looking at Harry.

“Me too,” he said faintly, steadying himself against the wall, feeling like he might have whiplash.

Tom smiled at him once more before heading into the library again. Harry followed belatedly, his mind far too muddled to process *any* of that.

— Scene five —

Harry slept fitfully, his mind halfway across the country. He wanted to crawl into Sirius's bed and make sure he was okay, brush his hair for him. It was something he did a lot when he got to stay with his Godfather for a weekend when he was younger—and then again when he was a teenager. In later years it became more of something he did to look after him.

He woke up with a headache and stayed in bed for a while, keeping an ear out for the sound of the phone ringing. He'd pretended to be asleep when Alphard woke up, not particularly feeling like interacting with anyone. When he was alone in the room, he curled up on his side, the quilt trapped between his legs as he hugged it.

It must have been around eleven o'clock in the morning when the phone rang. Harry could hear the faint ringing from his room and he got up, blinking his sleepy daze from his mind. He'd been waiting for the phone call all morning but he'd been dreading it.

When he got to the bottom of the stairs, the phone had stopped ringing. Tom was stood by the phone, the receiver pressed to his ear.

"It's for you," he said, handing the phone to Harry, his eyes flitting up and down his body.

Harry had a second to feel self-conscious about being in nothing but his boxers and a t-shirt but he swallowed it down. "Hello?" he said into the phone, his voice coming out smaller than he would have liked.

"*Harry*," Sirius said on the other end. He seemed tired, his voice gruff and frail. He sounded absolutely drained.

"Sirius," Harry replied. "How—how are you feeling?"

"*Awful*," Sirius said, sighing heavily into the receiver. "*I feel fucking terrible kiddo, I'm so sorry.*"

Harry closed his eyes, sitting down on the last step of the stairs. "Please don't apologise, Sirius."

"*No I—*" Sirius paused, sounding like he was rubbing a hand over his face. Harry could just see him; heavy eyebags, a few days worth of stubble lining his jaw, cheeks hollowed out— "*I really am, Harry. I know that—I know it's difficult for you to deal with me and I'm sorry to put you in that situation.*"

"It's fine," Harry said mechanically. He ran a hand through his hair, hanging his head.

"*It's not,*" Sirius said, sighing again. "*I've spoken with Remus—I'm going to rehab, today, and I'm not coming out 'til I'm better.*"

Harry bit into his lip, nodding. "That's great," he said halfheartedly.

"*I probably—*" Sirius cut off, taking a shaky breath— "*I probably won't make it to your December play*," he said, his voice choking off.

"I know," Harry whispered, pressing the phone to his cheek. He was hunched over, his head pressed to his knees as if to alleviate the hurt inside of himself, contain it somehow. "It's okay, the most important thing is that you get better."

"*I promise—I promise I'll make it to your end of year play,*" Sirius said urgently. "*I'll be there, and I'll be obnoxiously loud in the audience, and I'll be better.*"

Harry smiled, a small thing, his heart aching. "I know you will, Sirius. I believe in you."

"*Thank you*," Sirius whispered after a second of quiet. "*Thank you for checking up on me yesterday, and sending Remus.*"

"'Course," Harry replied quietly. "When are you leaving?"

"*As soon as I hang up*," Sirius said with a small laugh, more deprecating and awkward than happy.

"You'll be okay, Sirius," Harry said, wanting nothing more than to hug him. "You're strong, you'll get through it."

Sirius took a sharp breath. "*I know,*" he said faintly. "*I'd best—I'd best get going, Harry*."

"Of course," Harry replied, biting at his thumb. "You'll ring me whenever you get the opportunity to, won't you?"

"*Of course I will,*" Sirius said, sounding heartbroken. "*I'll do this, Harry, for you. I owe it to you, to James, to Lily, to Remus, to myself. I promise I'll do it this time and I'll stick to it.*"

"I know you will," Harry replied. It wasn't a lie—he'd never stopped believing in Sirius.

"*Okay, I love you kiddo,*" Sirius murmured.

"I love you too, Sirius, take care of yourself."

"*You too, Harry, I'll see you soon*."

"Yeah," Harry replied faintly, waiting until he heard the click of the phone being hung up. He stayed like that for a couple seconds, his heart clenching under the weight of knowing what Sirius was in for.

He eventually sighed and removed the phone from against his ear, pushing himself up to hook it back onto the wall.

"Coffee?"

It was Tom, hovering in the archway between the hallway and the kitchen.

Harry blinked up at him, idly wondering if he'd been there the whole time. "Er, yeah, please," he said weakly. "No whiskey though today."

"Noted," Tom said lightly before going into the kitchen.

Harry hovered, scratching at his arm, looking between the library and the kitchen. He settled for following Tom into the kitchen.

"Is he going to rehab then?" Tom asked as he moved around the kitchen, putting the kettle on.

"Yeah," Harry said, hovering awkwardly in the doorway. He pushed his glasses up his nose. "He's on his way there now." Tom just hummed, acknowledging what Harry had said very vaguely. "He won't be able to come to *Hamlet*."

Tom shrugged. "It's his loss," he said faintly.

"I'd've liked him to be there," Harry said weakly.

Tom gave him a look over his shoulder. "No one's ever come to see me play, it's not the end of the world."

"I—yeah," Harry said, stupidly. "Can students stay over the holidays?" he asked after a stretch of silence.

Tom looked over at him, his eyes raking up and down Harry again, making him feel smaller than he was. "Yes," he said eventually, "you just have to let Dumbledore know, he'll put your name down."

"Does—does anyone else stay over the holidays?" Harry asked, wondering if he might just go to Ron and Hermione's. He didn't fancy spending Christmas alone.

"Just me," Tom replied, going back to the coffee.

"Oh, right," Harry said, taking the mug Tom was handing to him. "It'll be just us then," he added, seemingly having made up his mind in less than two seconds. "Thanks for the coffee."

Tom smiled at him, just an uptick of his lips, and it was so charming. "No problem," he said, moving past Harry to go to the library, their arms brushing.

Harry stood there for a second, his heart thundering in his chest. He went back upstairs, back to bed. He needed some quiet.

— Scene six —

He stayed in his room for most of the day, reading quietly, leaning into the solemn mood he was in. It bled into Monday, the morning's lesson with Dumbledore dragging on. Whenever he tried to focus, he'd be uncomfortably assaulted with images of Sirius going through withdrawals. He developed a headache in the first hour of lessons.

He wanted nothing more than to go back to bed, dragging his feet all the way to the theatre in the afternoon.

Two hours into rehearsals and McGonagall had already reprimanded him four times, telling him to focus or to take five to go over his lines. He wasn't into it, incapable of shaking the screen clouding his mind, hindering him from focusing properly. He felt defeated in a way he hadn't in a long time and it was frustrating.

He was on stage with Tom and the boy playing Osric, rehearsing Act V, Scene two.

"*The concernancy, sir? why do we wrap the gentleman / in our more rawer breath?*" Tom said, his presence on the stage absolute like it always was. Harry wasn't as caught up in it as he usually was, watching the scene as if he were a spectator and not an actor. The words were just words, the meaning escaping him.

"*Sir?*" the boy playing Osric said. Harry was just waiting for the scene to play out really, aching to just leave the stage. He felt uncomfortable in a way he never did—*small*, *vulnerable*. He couldn't play Horatio, too entrenched in *Harry*.

He only keyed into something going on when he caught Tom's eye who was staring at him pointedly, the silence stretching on after Osric's line.

"What?" Harry said faintly, an automatic response to the scrutiny Tom was giving him.

Tom sighed. "It's your line."

"Oh—*oh*, fuck. Sorry," Harry said quickly, rubbing a hand across his face. "Sorry I—"

"You're not focusing," Tom said, his tone waspish, expression pinched in annoyance. "You're not here."

"Sorry—I know," Harry replied, shifting his weight.

"You *need* to focus," Tom snapped, looking frustrated.

"I'm trying—"

"No you're not," Tom huffed. "You're not trying, you're just staring off into space. You're setting us all back."

"I know that," Harry said, frustration mounting. "I'm trying—"

“Well try *harder*,” Tom snapped back.

The theatre was silent, the boy playing Osric standing to the side, clearly uncomfortable.

“I’m doing my best,” Harry hissed back. “For fuck’s sake it’s just not my fucking day!” All that anger and frustration he’d buried deep inside him since the day prior was bubbling to the surface, making him feel like his chest was rattling.

“Well we don’t have all fucking day,” Tom said, glaring at him.

“Oh fuck you,” Harry snapped, his voice louder than he’d expected, louder than it had been since yesterday. He didn’t feel that small at that moment.

“Oh that’s right, Harry,” Tom said with a wry grin, “show us those anger issues that make you hard to work with.”

Harry’s heart was pounding in his chest, the edges of his vision blurring out, focusing on Tom. “You want to see my *fucking* anger issues?” he spat, taking a step towards Tom who only smirked down at him, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Alright everyone take ten!” Dumbledore exclaimed, reminding Harry that there were other people in the room.

He glared at Tom, realising they were standing quite close and his fist was clenched, as if he was about to throw a punch. He took a couple steps back, consciously loosening his fingers and blinking, trying to shake the anger clouding his mind.

“Fuck,” he whispered to himself before stalking offstage, shouldering past his friends. Theo made an aborted gesture to stop him but Harry paid him no mind, walking along the corridors, getting to a cooler and bare part of the backstage area. He pressed his forehead to the cool concrete wall and took a deep breath. His mind was muddled, emotions warring inside him.

Everything was trying to break to the surface and he didn’t know what to do. He hated feeling this way.

He pushed off the wall when the ten minutes were up, intent on getting through the last scene as methodically and quickly as possible in the hopes that they’d be finished for the day then.

“Harry.”

It was Tom, standing just to the side of where Harry had been stewing in turmoil for the past ten minutes. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing him to just disappear. Tom might be fit but *god* was he infuriating.

“What?” Harry snapped, harsher than he should have.

Tom rolled his eyes. “I’ve spoken with Dumbledore, go back to the chapel. We’ll come back just the two of us tonight.”

And just like that, Harry's anger was gone. "What?" he repeated, weaker this time.

"You're in no state to do the scenes properly. Go back to bed or something. We'll work through the last scene tonight."

Harry didn't know what to do, feeling utterly thrown off-kilter. He'd expected a fight—or at the least an argument—he'd *wanted* it, even. "Okay," he ended up saying, his voice faint.

Tom left without a second glance and Harry exited the theatre unseen, crashing into bed as soon as he could, though he didn't feel so solemn anymore.

— Scene seven —

Harry felt inexplicably nervous as he and Tom entered the theatre. They'd done so many times in the past month but somehow it was different, there was a tension in the air, undoubtedly to do with the argument from earlier.

They hadn't spoken since Tom had told him they were leaving at nine o'clock. Harry had followed mindlessly, a knot of nerves already forming in his stomach.

"D'you want to do the last Act then?" Harry asked after clearing his throat, his voice uncomfortably loud in the empty and silent theatre. He didn't actually know how he'd manage to do the scenes well—any better than in the afternoon anyway. His mind was still oddly numb.

"We will do," Tom replied vaguely, taking his jacket off, leaving him in only his shirt and slacks. Harry hovered awkwardly on the stage, unsure of what they were doing. Tom came back over, sitting down on the floor near him. Harry blinked, sitting down belatedly.

"Er—what're we doing?" he asked eventually, when Tom failed to speak.

Tom leant back on his hands, looking up at the ceiling. "My whole life has been leading up to this performance in this play," he said quietly, and Harry found himself hanging onto every word. "I understand that what's going on with your Godfather is troubling but I refuse to have you fuck up on the night of the play, just because he's not in the audience."

Harry blinked, his mouth moving wordlessly, caught off guard.

"If you can't live up to the role, say so now and someone else will learn your lines," Tom added, unforgiving as he looked back at him.

"What?" Harry said, annoyance mixing in with his surprise. "It's not because I had a shit rehearsal today that I'm gonna blow the whole play! I've been doing fine so far."

Tom hummed, tilting his head to the side. "Good. Because I don't want anyone else playing Horatio," he said before standing up.

Harry's jaw dropped, finding himself staring at Tom's back. There was so much said in Tom's statement but nothing at all at the same time, it was infuriating. He was impossible to pin down—he still had no idea if Tom actually liked him or not.

"Let's do the last Act then," Tom declared, pushing his hair back, looking down at Harry expectantly. "There's actually something I want to try, with our characters."

Harry frowned before shaking his head, deciding to just go through with it and give it his best, already caught up in Tom's pull. He got up and followed Tom backstage so they could do their entrance together.

“What shall we do when someone else is supposed to talk?” Harry asked before they stepped out onto the stage.

“Let a second pass and then carry on with our dialogue,” Tom replied easily, looking down at him. “It’ll be a bit difficult for cues but it should be fine.”

“Okay,” Harry said, nodding as he took a quick breath, trying to get a grasp on his character, leaving himself behind.

Tom placed a hand on the small of his back, as he’d developed a habit of doing, and walked onto the stage. He crossed his arms though when they were out, looking in distaste at where the first clown always stood, before starting the scene.

It took Harry a couple of his lines but he was quickly drawn into the scene, listening to everything Tom said intently. Soon enough they weren’t Harry and Tom on that stage, but Hamlet and Horatio. It was exhilarating.

Harry thought he understood what Tom meant by ‘wanting to try something,’ the physical contact between them increased tenfold; fingers brushing here, a hand on the arm there, a hand on the back somewhere else.

They gravitated around each other, the rest of the theatre melting away, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Harry never failed to feel a bit breathless whenever their skin made contact.

When they were to hide during Ophelia's burial, Tom pushed him into a crouching position with a hand on his shoulder, bringing his hand up to the back of his neck, his fingers threading through the feathery end strands of Harry’s hair gently as they pretended to watch.

With Tom being so forward, Harry followed his lead, wrapping an arm around his waist when he was meant to separate him from Laertes, pulling him back as he said, “*Good my lord, be quiet*.” His hand lingered, stretching along the flat plane of his stomach. He had to wrench it away.

As they finished the first scene, Harry realised he was grinning. He took the bottle of water Tom was handing to him with a grateful smile and took a drink.

“We’ve never done such a good run,” Tom said quietly, a smile pulling at his lips. He didn’t need to be quiet, but Harry assumed it was the habit of having to whisper when backstage.

He smiled up at him. “I know, s’brilliant.”

“Ready for the last scene?” Tom asked, eyeing him in a way that Harry couldn’t decipher.

He nodded, letting Tom guide him back onstage with a hand on his back. Harry didn’t undergo the hold passively though. For this scene, an intense one between Horatio and Hamlet who seemed more on equal footing than ever, he decided to turn in Tom’s hold, bringing them that bit closer, as he rested his hand on Tom’s bicep.

"*So much for this, sir: now shall you see the other; / You do remember all the circumstance?*" Tom said, still holding Harry to him.

"*Remember it, my lord?"* Harry replied, looking up at Tom as he took a step back, removing his hand in favour of crossing his arms, conveying confusion.

Tom stalked to the side, giving his line. The scene went on, Tom portraying a liveliness in Hamlet he always did in this scene that was utterly enchanting. Harry hung onto his every word, replying when it was his line, leaning into Tom's brief touches and giving his own.

"*It must be shortly known to him from England / What is the issue of the business there.*" Harry said as they got to the end of the exchange, watching Tom pace a few metres from him.

"*It will be short: the interim is mine; / And a man's life's no more than to say 'One."*" Tom replied, turning to Harry and stalking over to him, leaving no room between them as he took his face in his hands, his fingers skirting affectionately in the strands of hair framing his cheeks. Harry's breath stuttered, not expecting the sudden touch. "*But I am very sorry, good Horatio, / That to Laertes I forgot myself; / For, by the image of my cause, I see / The portraiture of his: I'll court his favours. / But, sure, the bravery of his grief did put me / Into a towering passion.*"

Harry had latched onto his wrist at some point, one finger pressing against his pulse point in a very intimate hold. He blinked as he realised Tom had finished talking, the words spoken between them like a secret.

Harry jumped back, as if startled. His heart was certainly beating as if he were. "*Peace! who comes here?*" He stood to the side as Tom entertained his one-sided dialogue with Osric, giving his own lines when he was supposed to. It was very odd to do scenes with only two of them speaking.

Harry found himself playing Horatio slightly differently to what he was used to. When the Lord came bearing news of the potential duel between Laertes and Hamlet, Horatio was to try and persuade Hamlet not to do it. Harry became *desperate* with it, letting that desperation leak into his voice, almost as if he were sure Hamlet would die, *begging* him to not do it.

"*If your mind dislike any thing, obey it: I will / forestall their repair hither, / and say you are not fit.*" he said, gripping Tom's arm, pleading up at him to not go through with it.

Tom's eyes were wide as he looked down at him, the words he was about to pronounce quickly as he always did died on his tongue. He turned slowly, his hands coming up to frame Harry's face once again, looking at him with sorrow in his eyes. "*Not a whit, we defy augury: there's a special / providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, / 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be / now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the / readiness is all: since no man has aught of what he / leaves, what is't to leave betimes?*"

He spoke his lines as if he were engraving them into Harry's very soul, his hands cold on his skin, tilting his head back as if he were going to kiss him. Harry leant into him, his hands grappling at his shirt, *begging* him with his eyes, completely lost in the scene. It felt a lot like their interaction after Harry's phone call with Remus on Saturday night.

They parted, almost reluctantly, as they continued the scene, no longer supposed to be just the two of them. Harry watched Tom in his stilted one-sided dialogue, a small smile tugging at him.

When Tom fell to the floor, Harry was right behind him, kneeling beside him, his hands running on his chest, upkeeping the intimacy they'd portrayed throughout their whole playthrough of the scene.

"*Heaven make thee free of it! I follow thee. / I am dead, Horatio. Wretched queen, adieu! / You that look pale and tremble at this chance, / That are but mutes or audience to this act, / Had I but time--as this fell sergeant, death, / Is strict in his arrest--O, I could tell you-- / But let it be. Horatio, I am dead; / Thou livest; report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied."* Tom spoke the words like a dying man, eyes latched onto Harry's who was leaning above him. Tom's hands were on his wrists, following his hands as they touched his chest and neck.

"*Never believe it: / I am more an antique Roman than a Dane: / Here's yet some liquor left.*" Harry let that same desperation leak into his voice, his hand coming up to hold Tom's cheek, pleading with him to stay alive as he pretended to reach for the poison for himself.

Tom smiled, his hands leaving Harry's wrists to come up to his face again, pulling him down until their foreheads were touching. Harry tried to keep his breathing normal, fighting to stay in character though it wasn't a difficult task, so caught up in Horatio's sorrow. In the final play they'd scuffle over the cup filled with poison briefly, but Tom just held him close.

"*As thou'rt a man, / Give me the cup: let go; by heaven, I'll have't. / O good Horatio, what a wounded name, / Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me! / If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart / Absent thee from felicity awhile, / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story.*" His eyes were closed, his lips a breath away from Harry's and his words spoken like a hushed confession. Harry couldn't take his eyes off him.

There was a pause in their dialogue in which they just held each other, when the marching was supposed to be heard.

Tom opened his eyes. "*What warlike noise is this?*"

Harry pulled back, swallowing, his hands holding onto Tom's, their fingers lacing together. They stayed silent as Osric was supposed to deliver his line, Tom looking off to the side.

His eyes returned to Harry who leant forward minutely, his hands still clasped in Tom's. He gave him a small smile, his thumbs stroking along the back of his hands as Harry swallowed again, feeling choked up, his eyes filling with tears.

"*O, I die, Horatio; / The potent poison quite o'er-crows my spirit: / I cannot live to hear the news from England; / But I do prophesy the election lights / On Fortinbras: he has my dying voice; / So tell him, with the occurrents, more and less, / Which have solicited. / The rest is silence.*" He spoke his last words with a small smile, as if Hamlet could finally feel content, his hands squeezing Harry's one last time before his eyes fluttered shut.

A tear dropped down Harry's cheek, his hands unwinding from Tom's as he brought them back up to his face, brushing the hair from his forehead. *"Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince: / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!*" He leant down and pressed a kiss to Tom's cheek, letting it linger for a second before he realised what he was doing and pulled back. He wiped at his cheeks that had grown wet, his finger skirting along Tom's cheekbone that had flushed a pretty red.

He got up when it felt right and finished the scene, reciting his last lines perfectly, his voice cracked and desolate.

It was silent in the theatre when Harry delivered his last lines, blinking back into reality, his heart beating hard in his chest, his fingers still tingling with the feel of Tom's skin under them, his cheeks hot.

"That was brilliant," Tom said.

Harry turned around, seeing him sitting on the floor of the stage, grinning. He had never seen him smile so bright.

Harry let out a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding and smiled down at him. "It was," he said, sounding breathless. He sat down as well, needing a few minutes of rest.

"You're a brilliant actor, you know?" Tom said softly, his head tilted to the side, an easy openness to him Harry hadn't really seen before.

Harry let out a surprised laugh. "So are you." He was still awful at accepting compliments.

"I mean it," Tom said, an air of seriousness around him.

"So do I."

Tom stared at him for a second before laughing lightly, an incredulous sound. "You know, people are usually falling over themselves for a compliment from me, yet you can't accept one."

Harry smiled sheepishly, his nose scrunching up. "I'm just—not good at taking compliments, I suppose."

Tom smiled as if he found him endearing. "I knew you had it in you, anyway. I pushed you a bit earlier today because I wanted to bring *that* out in you—I realised it might not have been the best course of action though."

Harry scoffed, amused. "Why would you think goading me into a fight would make me give a better performance?"

Tom shrugged, the gesture somehow too casual for the person Harry had grown to know. "I thought it was the easiest way to get you to at least be responsive. Were you actually going to punch me?"

Harry laughed, pushing his glasses up his nose. "I think I was—yeah."

“Fair,” Tom said, his smile still on his lips. “Shall we go again?”

Harry hummed. “Yeah, we might as well, it’s only ten.”

“Cigarette?” Tom asked, grabbing his jacket and fishing a pack out with a lighter.

“Yeah, go on,” Harry said, taking the one proffered to him. He didn’t think they were necessarily supposed to smoke in the theatre, but they still did.

“Do you feel better about the Sirius thing?” Tom asked curiously.

Harry shrugged, rubbing at his jaw. “Kind of, yeah, I don’t feel out of it anymore, so I suppose your fight method worked a bit.” Tom smiled. “I don’t feel great, but it shouldn’t affect my acting anymore.”

“Good,” Tom said with a nod. “I wasn’t joking about having you recast.”

Harry snorted. “I thought you didn’t want anyone else playing Horatio,” he said with a sly grin. He wondered if he was flirting or if it was just banter. He wasn’t sure.

Tom smiled, exhaling smoke as he shook his head. “I did say that,” he said faintly. He had a soft kind of look to him, his cheeks slightly flushed, his hair curling on his forehead as he looked up at the ceiling, legs sprawled across the wood of the stage, his white shirt clinging to his chest.

Harry licked his lips, realising that he was definitely flirting. “Right,” he said, pinching the end of his cigarette to extinguish it. “Shall we go again?”

Tom did the same, standing up and dusting his trousers off.

They went over the final Act again, sticking to all the soft touches and intimate deliveries they’d initiated their first time around. It was even better, because both of them expected the physical contact, making their reactions more natural, as if they were long time intimate friends. Harry leant into Tom’s hands and Tom bent down that extra inch to be closer to him.

It was the most intimate experience of Harry’s life, somehow, and he felt breathless with the exhilaration of it.

As Harry’s face was cradled in Tom’s hands, their foreheads pressed together and their lips a breath away from each other’s, for the second time that evening, he realised something quite abruptly.

I fancy Tom Riddle.

— Scene eight —

That night Harry dreamt of Tom; his hands on his waist, his lips on his neck, Harry's hands in his hair, Tom's tongue in his mouth. It wasn't a sex dream, more a dream of profound intimacy. He still woke up hard.

In the theatre in the afternoon, Harry got onstage with a renewed sense of motivation after the time he'd spent with Tom there. They were still working on the fifth Act, getting used to the set that took shape everyday, art students painting and building around them as they rehearsed.

The theatre grew silent as Harry and Tom played together, and it took a while for Harry to realise, too caught up in the scenes he was playing. They retained every change they'd implemented the night prior, touching each other casually, holding one another intensely. Tom cradled Harry's face in his hands, Harry held onto his wrists, his fingers stroking across his pulse point. Tom threaded his fingers through his hair, they leant their foreheads together in the last scene, speaking quietly as if confessing their love for one another, Harry pressed a kiss to his cheek when Hamlet died.

Harry's tears came easily as they shared in their last dialogue, his words coming out choked and his cheeks growing wet.

Every touch and moment of closeness lingered, and Harry wondered if it had anything to do with his dream, if he was trying to recreate that, quelling that yearning and longing he felt in his bones. The lines between Hamlet for Horatio and Tom for Harry were starting to blur, for the better or for worse. On one side Harry's acting had never been so good, on the other his heart beat erratically and he worried he'd kiss Tom whenever they were close enough.

When Rick finished pronouncing his last lines as Fortinbras and Harry's cheeks were still wet from his tears, the others laying on the stage, dead, the theatre was silent.

Harry blinked, trying to overcome the all-consuming cloud of focus he'd been in throughout the rehearsal, trying to come back to himself, leaving Horatio's sorrow behind.

"Good God," McGonagall said, looking somewhat star-struck. Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling, and Snape's perpetually pinched look was smoothed out into something that looked like approval.

"What the *fuck* was that?" Theo exclaimed as he stood up, breaking the silence that had prevailed. His wide eyes were flicking compulsively from Harry to Tom.

"Mr Nott!" McGonagall said reproachfully.

Harry stared at Theo, trying to gauge what his reaction meant. "What?" he said, sounding as confused as he felt. "Was it not good?"

Theo sputtered and Harry saw Tom roll his eyes as he stood up.

“Ignore him,” Tom said, looking straight at Harry. “He’s insane and has never seen good acting in his life.”

Theo sputtered again, waving his arms around wildly. “Are we just supposed to brush past *that*?”

“We just er—” Harry said awkwardly, looking over at Tom— “we just rehearsed last night and went with that.”

“Is that some kind of euphemism to say you had sex in the theatre?” Rick asked with a pointedly raised eyebrow.

“*What*?” Harry said at the same time Tom did, staring at Rick incredulously. Harry’s cheeks were burning.

“No, because he’s right!” Theo exclaimed, still flailing about like a mad man. “Because before you had chemistry but that was a whole fucking chemical reaction!”

Harry gawked as Tom pinched the bridge of his nose, many of the other people still onstage snickering.

“Be quiet, Theodore,” Tom snapped, sounding exasperated.

“Was it too much?” Harry asked, turning to the Professors.

Dumbledore chuckled, clasping his hands in front of himself. “Is there anything such as too much in the arts of the theatre?” he said, amused. “You are simply leaning into the romantic aspect of Hamlet and Horatio’s relationship, it is a choice—a bold one, but one that fits you as actors. You portray everything about it beautifully.”

Harry’s face was flaming but he nodded in thanks, smiling lightly.

“Your body language conveys every emotion so well,” McGonagall said, looking more impressed than Harry had ever seen her. “The desperation, the madness, the disdain, the anger, the *love*. Well done boys, I’m astounded by your performance today.”

Snape hummed. “I must say, if you deliver a performance such as that on the day of the actual play, it will be a performance to remember. My worries have been sated.”

“I believe you have truly found your footing with your characters,” Dumbledore said kindly. “Well done, to the both of you but to everyone else as well. I don’t doubt you will all give us an incredible performance.”

“Thank you,” Tom said, his deep voice closer to Harry than he expected, startling as a strong arm settled around his shoulders. He looked up to find Tom’s smile looking down at him.

Harry relaxed, leaning into him a bit as he gave him a smile of his own.

“I think that’s enough for today,” McGonagall said, looking at the other Professors who nodded in agreement. “We must let the art students get on with their jobs, remember seventh

years you have your costume fittings tomorrow morning. Sixth years, yours are Thursday morning. We will see you tomorrow."

Tom removed his arm, going over to pick his things up. Harry followed, trying to ignore their friends who were sharing looks behind their backs.

"We must have been really good if McGonagall's letting us off after one run," Harry commented, pulling his jumper back on.

"We were," Tom said with a smirk. "We'll probably start doing the whole play next week."

"D'you think you're okay with your lines?" Harry asked, walking alongside Tom as they left the theatre. Their friends were somewhere behind them but Harry was having trouble pulling his attention away from Tom.

He hummed in thought. "I should be, there'll probably be a couple I forget but I should be fine. I might go over the third Act again before next week, that's where I tend to forget lines."

"Let me know if you need help," Harry said with a grin.

Tom smiled at him, one of the genuine ones Harry saw the most of when it was just the both of them. "I will do," he said. "What about you? Do you know your lines?"

Harry nodded. "I do, I just need to focus really."

Tom laughed lightly, giving Harry a look. "That is your issue, but I'm sure you'll be fine."

Harry smiled. They were halfway to the chapel, the grass was still frosty, the chilly November Scottish air turning their cheeks red.

"Shall we have a drink?" Harry asked as Tom unlocked the door. "Warm up a bit."

"Yeah, I'll go put the heating on," Tom said, disappearing into the kitchen.

"Who wants a drink?" Harry called out as the other boys piled into the library, shrugging their coats off. They all said yes, sitting around the table. Harry served seven glasses of whiskey, handing everyone theirs.

Tom came back and walked up to the side table where Harry was grabbing their glasses.

"Here," Harry said, handing him his with a smile.

"Cheers," Tom said with a grin, clinking his glass to Harry's, making him laugh as he echoed the word. They took their usual seats, Harry struggling to keep his attention off Tom sat across from him.

"I can't believe we've got the afternoon off," Gaspar said with a happy sigh, sitting back in his chair.

“Yeah, I think we’ve got Harry and Tom to thank for that,” Rick said with a grin, lifting his glass in their direction.

“Play like that in December and you’ll be having contracts shoved under your noses left and right,” Abraxas said with a funny smile.

“You were brilliant, really,” Theo said, rolling a joint. “I’ve never seen either of you play like that.”

“I must admit, when you appeared in Dumbledore’s classroom on the first day of school, I was sceptical, Harry,” Rick said with a small laugh. “You definitely deserve to be here though, I doubt any one of us could have given a performance like that in rehearsals.”

“I agree,” Alphard said from beside Harry.

“I mean,” Rick went on, “you were *crying*. When we were doing that last scene, you were really crying and you still managed to get through your lines, it was more than impressive.”

Harry laughed a bit self-consciously, his nose scrunching up. “Thanks,” he said, his eyes straying to Tom who was watching him, looking amused.

“You too, Tom,” Theo added, giving him a look that Harry couldn’t pinpoint. “You were a completely different person when you were playing with Harry.”

Tom shrugged. “Hamlet’s a different person with Horatio.”

Theo hummed. “It all seemed very genuine.” Harry could tell he was trying to say something but was edging around the subject.

“We’re good actors,” Tom replied easily, taking the joint from Theo.

“Did something happen yesterday?” Theo asked, seemingly incapable of holding the question in though he tried to make it sound nonchalant.

“What do you mean?” Tom asked with a frown. The others were silent, listening intently. Harry knew exactly what Theo was asking and he had a feeling Tom knew too.

Theo shuffled in his seat, glancing at Harry before looking back at Tom. “When you went to the theatre, did something happen? Between the two of you?”

“This again?” Tom said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Harry sighed, shaking his head. “*Nothing* happened yesterday,” he said pointedly, hoping he wasn’t blushing. “Tom threatened to have me recast,” he said with a grin, “and then we just decided to go over the fifth Act, attempting a new angle. And it worked.”

“And whose idea was this…new angle?” Theo asked curiously.

“Er—Tom’s, I suppose, but we didn’t really talk about it,” Harry said, shrugging.

“Hm,” Theo hummed vaguely, looking at Tom who gave him a pointed look. They seemed to have a whole silent conversation in no more than two seconds and Harry couldn’t dream of understanding any of it. Tom rolled his eyes at the end of it, looking away from Theo who was frowning.

The subject was dropped after that, general chatter about costumes and the set picking up.

“Who’s coming to see the play anyway? For you lot I mean,” Gaspar asked.

“My parents are coming,” Rick said. “I’m not sure about my brother.”

“Mine are coming too,” Abraxas said.

Gaspar nodded. “Mine too, what about you lot?”

Alphard made a sound, half-sigh, half-huff. “I don’t think anyone’s coming for me. I haven’t actually spoken to any of them since school started.”

Harry frowned. From what Alphard had mentioned in passing and from Sirius’s extensive rants, the Black family sounded awful.

“My mum and sister are coming,” Theo said. “I dunno about my dad though, he might be busy.”

It would be highly intimidating playing in front of all his friends’ families, Harry thought. They were all incredibly famous, people he’s grown up watching on television and seeing on the front of magazine covers.

Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy were actors, as were all the Blacks, and Mr. and Mrs. Nott. Gaspar’s parents were musicians, world renowned classical musicians. Rick’s father was an actor and a singer, and his mother a model and a pop star. If Harry remembered correctly, Rick’s brother was actually a famous rugby player who played for the English National team. Harry had been a fan of his when he was at school.

“What about you, Harry?” Alphard asked.

“Er—Ron and Hermione, my two best friends, are supposed to be coming. And Remus, probably,” Harry said with a smile. It hurt that he couldn’t include Sirius on the list.

“That’s er—” Gaspar started, visibly trying to appear casual— “Remus Lupin, correct?”

Harry laughed. “That’s him, yeah.”

Gaspar nodded, biting back a grin. “Would he be open to an autograph?”

The others laughed, amused. Harry grinned. “He’d be happy to give you an autograph,” he said happily.

Gaspar grinned, fidgeting with barely contained excitement. “What’s he like?” he asked eagerly. “In real life, I mean, ‘cause he’s so cool in interviews and music videos and on

stage."

Harry laughed, thinking about it. "He's just as cool in real life," he said honestly. "He's very calm, kind, always humming something or other, and he has like piles and piles of notebooks filled with lyrics."

"God," Gaspar breathed out, stars in his eyes. "What about Sirius?" he asked. "I *loved* the album he did with Remus and your dad."

There was a tense second of silence where everyone sent wide eyed looks at Gaspar but Harry only smiled.

"Sirius is…a lot," he said with a laugh. "He's very loud and chaotic, always singing or reciting some random script or monologue for a play. He's funny and a great listener. He's a terrible driver, never on time, 'fashionably late' he calls it. He's cluttered—his house is just full of *stuff*, paper, books, records, just everything lying around. It's very him."

"He's nothing like the rest of our family," Alphard commented with a small smile. "I have such good memories of him, I'm hoping to keep in touch once school's over."

"He'd love that," Harry said lightly.

"Did Sirius and Remus go to school together then?" Theo asked.

Harry nodded. "Remus and my mum studied music here, they both got in on scholarships. They were best friends. Remus became friends with my dad and Sirius who studied theatre together. I think Sirius would've preferred to do music, but he didn't have much choice."

"What about your parents? What were they like?" Abraxas asked curiously.

Harry smiled, crossing his arms as he leant back in his seat, thinking about it. "My mum was just—ethereal really, I'm not really sure how to describe her. She was funny, creative, *stubborn*—she was lovely. She'd always have her guitar on hand and like Remus she had notebooks full of songs. My dad was *loud,* a bit like Sirius. He was always cracking jokes and I just remember him being *loud* for no reason at all. He was very dramatic but he'd always play with me and take me places."

"Did they get together in school?" Gaspar asked. "Because they had you quite early on, our parents are much older than yours would be."

Harry laughed lightly, scrunching up his nose. "They weren't, no. My mum actually couldn't stand my dad for a long time. My dad, Sirius, and Remus opened for my mum's first concerts though, her first tour in America for her first album. They got together then. My mum wrote a song about it actually, it was like ten minutes long and she'd just sing along while she played guitar—she never released it though. My dad always asked her to sing it—she mentions a truck in it and he'd always look at me and say 'we made you in that truck' which in hindsight is nasty."

The boys laughed, startled by the information.

“I would pay so much money to hear that song,” Gaspar said with wide eyes.

Harry chuckled, feeling his cheeks flush. “I know it,” he said lightly, “if anyone’s got a guitar?”

It was funny how fast Gaspar jumped to his feet. “Acoustic or electric?” he asked in a rush.

Harry laughed, surprised by his enthusiasm. “Acoustic’s fine. I’ll come up too, I need to get my mum’s notebook, I’m not sure I can remember all the lyrics.”

“Oh my *god*, I can’t believe I’m gonna be in the presence of Lily Evans’s notebook of unreleased songs,” Gaspar said, looking absolutely delighted before rushing upstairs.

Harry laughed as he went upstairs, finding the notebook he was looking for on his desk. He flicked through it quickly, his heart giving a pang at seeing the familiarity of his mum’s writing in fading ink.

He went back downstairs and took the guitar Gaspar was pressing into his arms. He laughed again, a bit self-conscious. “I’m not the best singer,” he said faintly, “and I’m a bit rusty on the guitar.”

Gaspar was grinning eagerly, leaning over the table to get a look at the notebook Harry set on it as he took his seat again, settling the guitar in his lap. The other boys looked curious, Harry caught Tom’s eye and felt inexplicably nervous. He took a quick drink of whiskey before strumming the strings of the guitar, finding it already tuned.

“Alright,” he said, clearing his throat before strumming the first chords, the tune coming back to him easily. “*You fell in love with America when you were twelve years old*,” he sang quietly, trying to get the easy American accent his mum would always do. He found he barely needed his mum’s notebook, the lyrics more imprinted in his mind than he’d remembered.

The other boys were quiet as he sang, listening intently. Harry was lost in it, hearing the echo of his mum’s voice in his own. He could almost see his dad sprawled on his stomach, kicking his legs in the air with his head resting in his hands, staring up at his mum adoringly.

As the lyrics came to a close, Harry played the outro, two whole minutes with no real lyrics, only a gentle strumming on the guitar, a faint melody carrying the end of the song. His mum would always play it, and his dad would watch her with stars in his eyes.

“That was incredible,” Gaspar said on a breath, looking star-struck, as Harry finished, tapping the guitar self-consciously.

“It really was,” Tom said, something like fondness in his eyes when Harry looked up.

Harry blushed bright, looking down again, feeling very self-conscious under his friends’ wide-eyed looks.

“So you’re just the most talented person here?” Theo stated, earning a few laughs.

“I—thanks,” Harry said, scratching at the back of his head.

“It’s such a beautiful song,” Alphard commented, sounding breathless. He leant over Harry’s shoulder and eyed the notebook. “It’s such a shame she never got to release it.”

“I don’t think she wanted to,” Harry said quietly. “From what I gathered, her record label didn’t want a nine minute song, they thought people would hate it. And my mum refused to cut it down, so she only sang it when my dad begged her to, in our living room and garden most of the time.”

“Record labels can be so stupid,” Rick said with an eye roll. “It’s all about what can be commercial, what can be played on the radio, what can *make money*. They forget musicians are artists, and your mum was a terrific lyricist.”

Harry smiled, a genuine smile that warmed his heart. “She was,” he agreed happily.

“You’re a very good singer,” Abraxas commented, giving him a grin.

Harry’s smile turned shy. “Thanks,” he murmured, clearing his throat.

“A right catch,” Theo said with a grin.

“What? Harry?” Rick said with a laugh.

Theo nodded, winking Harry’s way. Harry only laughed, shaking his head.

“You’re embarrassing him,” Tom said with a smirk.

“Shut up,” Harry replied with a laugh, kicking Tom gently under the table. He got another smirk, Tom’s foot tapping his once.

“Did you not consider doing music, Harry?” Alphard asked. “You know, growing up around musicians and stuff.”

Harry hummed. “Not really, if I did do music I’d do it like my dad—you know, a bit of fun here and there. I always loved theatre, I wouldn’t do anything else.”

“It’s the same for me,” Gaspar said. “I love music, I love what my parents do. I just prefer theatre.”

“I think my mum hoped me or my brother would go into music,” Rick commented. “But we’re both shit at it.”

“Speaking of your brother,” Harry said as casually as he could, reminding himself of Gaspar asking about Remus, “he’s er—the rugby player, right?”

“Yeah?” Rick said with a curious grin.

Harry cleared his throat. “Would he er—would he give me an autograph d’you think?”

Rick burst out laughing while the others chuckled teasingly.

“You fancy him don’t you?” Theo said with a laugh.

“I—*no*,” Harry said quickly, feeling his cheeks heat up. “Not anymore anyway,” he added quietly. They laughed again, Rick positively howling with laughter, tears in his eyes.

“Did you have the poster?” Rick asked around a gasp for air.

Harry blanched, the image of his room in Sirius’s house with a huge poster of Christopher Lestrange flexing his muscles while shirtless on the wall appearing at the forefront of his mind. “The er—which one?” he asked, attempting to sound casual.

Rick snorted. “You know exactly which one I’m talking about.”

Harry hung his head, embarrassment clinging to him. “Yeah,” he admitted feebly. Rick’s brother was *very* fit.

“What’s this? I was never into sports,” Gaspar said with a grin.

Rick grinned, a shark-like thing in Harry’s direction. “We always make fun of him for it, it’s this huge thing where he’s completely—”

“Rick *please* don’t,” Harry pleaded from behind his hands.

“—shirtless,” Rick pressed with a chuckle, “flexing his muscles and everything.”

Theo cackled. “Is that your type then, Harry?”

Harry groaned, pressing his forehead to the table. “No,” he grumbled, “it’s not actually.”

Theo made a sound of interest. “What’s your type then?”

Harry straightened out, shrugging. “Not rugby lads,” he said with a scrunched up nose. “They’re very *brutish* and boisterous. They’re great friends but maybe not…partners,” he added, cringing.

Rick whistled. “You ever been with a rugby lad, Harry? Sounds like you’re talking from experience.”

Harry’s cringe deepened, memories of Jason creeping up. He was a nice boy, albeit a bit *stupid*. He insisted he liked girls and *all friends wank each other off*. Harry cleared his throat. “Yeah,” he said feebly. “For a very brief time.”

“Oh, had a lot of boyfriends, have you?” Theo asked with a curious grin.

“A couple,” Harry said, willing his blush to die down. “Not boyfriends though—more, er… friends who—you know, snog and—” Why was he still talking?

Theo’s jaw had dropped, all the other boys snickering in surprise. “And?” Theo prompted.

“You know,” Harry said vaguely, his face burning.

“Oh, I think we know,” Theo said with a teasing grin.

“Are you not into girls then, Harry?” Abraxas asked curiously.

“I’ve had a couple girlfriends,” Harry said honestly. “I prefer boys though,” he admitted, cheeks flaming.

“What’s your type then?” Theo asked, propping his chin on his hand. “Not rugby boys, girls sometimes but not really. You’re not giving us much here, Harry.”

Harry cleared his throat, incapable of looking at Tom who he hadn’t dared glance at since this whole conversation had started. His mind was chanting *Tom Tom Tom, Tom is your type!* “Tall,” he choked out, “and smart, I suppose.”

“Tall and smart?” Alphard said with an amused snort. “Specific,” he added sarcastically.

“Right, so that’s Gaspar off the table anyway,” Theo said, looking around at them all. “We can eliminate Rick too 'cause he’s tall but he’s not smart—”

“Hey!”

“—and Alphard’s like average height so he’s out too,” Theo went on. “Brunettes or blondes, Harry?”

Harry’s mouth was hanging open in surprise, astonished by what was happening. “Brunettes, I suppose. Sorry Abraxas, no offence.”

“None taken,” Abraxas said, sounding amused.

“So that leaves Tom and me,” Theo said with a smirk. “Which is perfect because you’re just my type, Harry, care to go out on a date? Maybe get up to what you did with your rugby lad?”

Harry sputtered, laughing incredulously. “You’re mad.”

“Am I not your type?” Theo asked, mock-offended.

Harry shook his head. “He’s got to be charming too.”

Theo’s jaw dropped. “Am I not charming?”

“No you’re not,” Tom said suddenly, the first thing he’d said in ages. Harry reluctantly glanced his way. “Which leaves only me,” he said with a mean smirk directed at Theo.

“You’re not charming!” Theo exclaimed. “If I’m not, you can’t be classed as charming!”

“Oh?” Tom said with a raised eyebrow. He turned to Harry who suddenly felt very put on the spot. “Am I charming, Harry?” he asked, a charming smirk in place.

Harry's mouth moved wordlessly for a second, his cheeks burning up. He was starting to wonder if he might have a fever. In his panic he turned back to Rick. “So, will your brother give me an autograph?” he asked quickly. His mind had never been further away from Chris Lestrange however, completely overrun by the image of Tom’s charming smile.

Rick laughed, as did the others. “‘Course,” he said around an amused grin.

— Scene nine —

As the weeks wore on the set took shape until it was in its final form. The art students had really outdone themselves. The main set was made to look like a grand hall in Elsinore Castle, with large windows at the back, grand pillars, and artwork on the back wall. The set changes would be minor, using lighting mainly and various props.

In the beginning of December they took to rehearsing the play in its entirety every day, with costumes, live music, and the set that would be supervised by fifth and sixth year theatre students in charge of lighting and set changes.

The first rehearsals like that were a bit difficult, the actors being unused to working with the whole production around them—stumbling onstage or forgetting lines was common in those first few days. The younger years messed up a few times as well, getting the lighting wrong, or getting the scene mixed up, plunging the stage in darkness when it was meant to be bright, for instance.

But, they got there in the end, their rehearsals turning into full productions with no technical issues that went on for over four hours.

Some time in November Tom and Alphard had taken to rehearsing their combat sequences in the evening, practising the blocking over and over again to make sure they could easily anticipate the other's movements. Harry always followed them, happy to watch and give an outsider's perspective, adjusting their angles for them to give the audience a better show. It was always fun and Harry was happy to spend his evenings in the theatre.

However, in early December, Tom asked Viola Carrow who played Ophelia to join them one evening so they could go over the first two scenes in Act three.

Harry watched, his stomach churning with something that felt a lot like jealousy, as Tom sprawled at Viola's feet, reciting his lines animatedly. It was the first time he'd actually done it, and Harry had almost forgotten that it was an action that actually featured in the play.

It was torture to watch. Knowing what Tom's hands felt like on his skin, knowing how soft his hair was, knowing what his smile looked like up close—it was torture to watch someone else get to experience that.

"How was that?" Tom asked as he came up to the edge of the stage, looking down at Harry. He'd taken to asking for Harry's feedback whenever he finished rehearsing a scene. "Too much? Not enough?"

Harry looked up at him, swallowing around the bitter taste in his mouth, trying to force a smile. "Was good," he said, his voice lacking in sincerity. Actually, he hadn't been paying much attention to what was being said or *how* it was being said and played—he'd been too caught up on staring intensely at the points of contact between Tom and Viola.

"It lacked sincerity," Theo said from beside him, he'd tagged along as he sometimes did. "That was nothing like how you play intimacy with Harry."

Tom scowled lightly, looking over to the side. “It’s not supposed to be sincere, it’s a play on madness, it’s an act.”

“Yeah but from the text, Hamlet does actually *like* Ophelia,” Theo pressed. “He’s not trying to trick her or anything—yeah he’s playing up to it for the others but not necessarily to her. She’s not just a ploy, she’s a character Hamlet’s supposed to like, she *is* supposed to be the love interest.”

Tom scoffed. “Alright I didn’t realise you were an expert on how Hamlet should be played,” he said tetchily.

Theo let out an incredulous laugh. “You *asked* for my opinion! I just don’t understand why you’re so good at displaying intimacy with Harry but you’re struggling with Viola—we’re a week away from the play, maybe you two should spend some time together, like you and Harry did.”

Harry felt oddly *betrayed*. How could Theo propose such a thing? But when he looked up, he and Tom were in one of their silent conversations essentially comprised of glares.

Tom huffed. “What did you think, Harry?”

Harry blinked up at him. “I thought it was good,” he said faintly, giving him a tight smile. He wasn’t being objective, but he *couldn’t be*. The lines between Hamlet and Tom had blurred far too long ago and he couldn’t stand to see him with anyone else.

“I disagree, it was far too strained whenever you had to touch her,” Theo said, staring up at Tom before looking past him to Viola. “You were really good by the way, Viola. My critiques are only for Tom,” he added with a kind smile and a thumbs up. She smiled back at him.

“I think you’re being a bit harsh, Theo,” Alphard interjected from Harry’s other side. “It definitely wasn't as bad as you’re making it out to be. I think it was good—obviously not as natural as with Harry but that’s the level of acting that’s expected of us. What Tom and Harry do together onstage isn’t what’s expected of us.”

“But Tom’s proved he can go above and beyond what’s expected,” Theo said, turning to him. “I’m just saying that it’ll be noticeable if he's not *as good* in one particular scene.”

“But it’s not even the dialogue that’s not as good,” Alphard replied, just as worked up as Theo. “It’s just the actions, his lines are delivered perfectly. Honestly I doubt anyone would notice.”

Theo waved a hand in the air. “Fine,” he said, sitting back in his seat, “it doesn’t have to be perfect but I still think you should do the scene a few more times.”

Tom looked between them. “If you’ve finished your little spat,” he said, sounding bemused.

“Don’t be a twat,” Theo said with a reluctant smile, “we’re just giving you the feedback *you asked for*.”

“I was asking Harry, actually,” Tom said with a sniff. Harry didn’t want to acknowledge how that made giddy butterflies come to life in his stomach.

“Harry’s advice was shit,” Theo said with a laugh. Which was true, but if Harry were to give his real opinion, he wouldn’t have Tom and Viola touch *at all*.

“I just don’t have anything constructive to say,” he said instead, trying to make his words casual. “It was good—to me, anyway.”

Tom hummed. “We’ll go again, but I’m not that bothered about this particular scene being perfect.”

Harry had to suffer through another rendition of the scene, which, to his dismay, Tom did much better in—if he was judging based on Theo and Alphard’s standards.

The next day when they were in rehearsals again and they got to Tom’s scene with Viola, Harry was on stage. And, when they started being physical Harry looked off to the side, his jaw clenched. He couldn’t actually stop himself from having a reaction, his skin crawling at the sight.

When they’d finished Dumbledore had commended him on his attention to detail, bringing to light his involuntary movement of disgust and jealousy. He could only smile, biting back the embarrassment, and pretend it was just because he was a good actor. Nothing to do with how he wanted Tom to *only* touch him like that.

— Scene ten —

The day of the play, signalling the last day of term, came much faster than Harry would have anticipated. And he was far more nervous than he would've imagined.

He woke up early, his mind snapping out of a strange dream he couldn't quite remember very abruptly, leaving him breathless with itchy eyes. Alphard woke up minutes later, a look of pure terror washing over his features seconds after he'd opened his eyes.

"Oh god," he muttered, wiping a hand down his face.

Harry laughed lightly, nodding. He hoped that if he appeared as casual as possible the lump in his throat would dissipate and the twisting in his stomach would stop.

It was a relief that their families would arrive later in the morning, keeping their minds off the play for the rest of the day.

"Is anyone coming for you?" Harry asked, propping the window open to get a bit of fresh air in the room. Alphard had tried to get ahold of his family a few times, but whenever they actually answered, they couldn't give a definitive answer to whether they were coming or not.

He shook his head, scratching along his pale collarbone. "Nah, I managed to ring my mum last night and she just said they were busy."

"Oh," Harry said, a note of sadness in his voice. "Remus will be happy to see you, he'll cheer for you too."

Alphard, who had been doing his best to mask a frown, smiled shyly. "Brilliant," he said happily. "We'd best go down, I know Theo and Gaspar will be in all their states already."

Harry laughed as he got up, pulling on some nice trousers and a t-shirt that belonged to Sirius. Despite the early hour, he could already hear movement on the ground level of the chapel. He and Alphard traipsed down the stairs to join the others, finding Theo, Gaspar, and Tom already in the library cradling mugs of coffee.

"Morning," Theo greeted with a tight smile. He looked like he might be sick. There was a seat open between him and Tom, so Harry went over and pinched Theo's shoulders from behind, making him shiver with how tense he was.

"Nervous?" he asked, smiling down at him before taking the seat between him and Tom.

"So fucking nervous," Theo replied, pressing his forehead into the table.

Harry patted his back comfortingly, finding the dramatics amusing despite his own nervousness. "What about you, Tom?" he asked, looking to his right and meeting his eyes that were already on him.

“Alright,” he replied, his tone so obviously that of forced casualness Harry smiled, his eyes flitting down to Tom’s mouth for a split second.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” he managed to say around the fantasies of reaching up and kissing Tom right there that were playing in his mind. “Where’re Rick and Abraxas?”

“Rick’s gone for a run,” Gaspar said from across the table, “it’s something he does when we have shows. And Abraxas is still in bed.”

“He couldn’t get to sleep last night,” Theo supplied, sitting back up in his chair. “Do you two want some coffee?” he asked, looking at Harry and Alphard. “I’ll go make you some, I need to do something.”

“Cheers, Theo,” Harry said as he left for the kitchen. “What time is everyone getting here?”

“Around ten,” Gaspar said, “they should come straight here.”

Harry hummed. The school had set up accommodation for the seventh years’ families and friends down in the village. All being well, they’d all arrived last night and stayed in the inn overnight. Their stay was extended until the next day, when students would return home with their parents for the Christmas holidays, though Harry would be staying at the school.

Theo came back with Harry and Alphard’s coffees and they all sat in relative silence while they drank. Abraxas appeared half an hour after Harry and Alphard had, looking rather worse for wear, and Rick came back not long after, sweaty with flushed cheeks from exertion and the frosty December air.

When they could no longer put it off, they each went for a shower and helped each other shave with Rick’s fancy straight razor.

“Stop, stop,” Tom said sharply as Theo went to give Harry a hand with the razor. “You’ll slit his throat with how much your hands are shaking, come here, Harry.”

Harry blinked, unsure of what to do. Theo gave him a sheepish look, nodding in Tom’s direction and handing him the sharp razor. “Where do you want me?” he asked feebly, feeling heat rise up in his cheeks as he hovered beside where Tom was sitting.

Tom pushed his chair back, leaving room between him and the table. “Sit here,” he said, gesturing, very obviously, to his lap.

Harry’s mind short circuited, his cheeks flaming as all his nerves came back in full force. Tom had instructed it so casually he felt he couldn’t make a big deal out of it without drawing suspicion to himself, so, with as much dignity as he could muster, Harry shuffled until Tom’s legs were between his, and perched on his knees, his feet hooking onto the back of the chair.

Tom nodded, looking as composed as ever while Harry could feel his heart beating a sickening tune in his chest. He was sure Tom would be able to feel it when he brought the razor up to his throat.

Tom leant forward, his chest pressing to Harry's, as he grabbed the bowl of water and dragged it towards himself. "Stay still," he murmured as he took Harry's chin in his hand, his eyes intent on his face.

Harry swallowed and did his best to remain still. He didn't know what to do with his hands, so they rested uselessly on his thighs. His breath quickened as Tom brought the razor to his cheek, unsure of where to look, his eyes drifting compulsively to Tom's lips with the proximity.

The cool steel touched his skin and Harry's breath stuttered, his fingers bunching up the fabric of his trousers.

"Tell me if I press too hard," Tom said quietly.

Harry hummed in response, utterly incapable of speaking a single word. He was horrified to find that he was quite turned on by the whole situation. He hoped the shaving foam would mask the worst of his blush.

It went on for a while like that, Harry trying desperately to listen to whatever the fuck his friends were talking about to keep his mind off Tom's fingers skirting along his jaw, his legs shifting under his arse, his intense stare, his full lips, the press of the blade to his skin.

"Hold on," Tom murmured at some point before he wrapped an arm around Harry's waist and shifted his chair forward, leaving Harry fully trapped with the table at his back and his arse halfway up Tom's thighs. "So I can get your neck," Tom explained as he removed his arm and straightened out, putting some much needed distance between them.

"Am I not hurting you?" Harry asked faintly, in an effort to dispel the sound of the razor scraping his skin from his mind.

Tom chuckled, amused, as he rinsed the razor off. "You weigh approximately four pounds, so no, you're not hurting me," he said with a smirk and a cocked eyebrow.

Harry decided it would be best if he shut his mouth, lest he ask Tom to kiss him, or stab him. He only smiled and rolled his eyes in an attempt to keep his composure.

Tom tilted Harry's chin back and set to work on shaving his jaw and throat. Harry was absolutely sure Tom could feel his hammering pulse where he was holding his throat gently to keep him from moving. He had to bite his lip inconspicuously when Tom drew the razor down the column of his throat, dreadfully aroused by the motion.

It took a while, and every drag of the razor across his skin made Harry's heart beat faster. It was so *intimate* and he couldn't help but wonder how on earth he'd gotten into this situation with Tom. They weren't necessarily close, he wouldn't dare call them friends, but every one of their interactions was strangely heated, tense, *intimate*.

"There you go," Tom said, setting the razor down on the table behind Harry and grabbing the towel to pat his face down. The motion was gentle, domestic, and it made Harry giggle after the suffocating intensity of having a blade to his throat.

“Done?” he asked as Tom set the towel back down.

Tom smiled, nodding. “Yeah, aftershave?”

“I have some upstairs,” Harry said, making to get up despite quite liking having the privilege of being in Tom’s lap.

Tom halted his movement with a hand on his hip. “I have mine here,” he said casually, holding Harry in place.

Harry could only watch, his heart somewhere in his throat, as Tom poured out his own aftershave that smelled so much like *him*, and rubbed it between his hands, before pressing it to Harry’s skin like it was the most normal thing to do in the world.

The smell was all-consuming, *intoxicating*, and Harry didn’t know how he’d survive a day of smelling like Tom. Smelling him on every breeze, every time he touched his face, every time he inhaled.

“Thank you,” he managed to choke out, his voice sounding funny and his smile coming out strained. He took a quick breath and righted his smile, not wanting it to seem ingenuine, because he really did appreciate Tom’s attention.

Tom smiled, his hands resting very quickly and very briefly on Harry’s thighs before he breathed in sharply and said, “Do me?” with pink tinged cheekbones.

Harry’s brain short circuited again as he thought that, *yes, I would like to do you*, but he shook himself mentally and nodded. He wasn’t entirely sure if he was fit for wielding a very sharp object against Tom’s pretty face but he’d get unlimited access to his skin, he’d get to stare and scrutinise him as much as he wanted, so he’d take his chances.

“Like this?” Harry asked, unsure why he kept directly referencing the fact that he was propped in Tom’s lap.

Tom nodded. “If you’re okay like this.”

“Yeah, fine,” Harry said, twisting around to grab the shaving foam. He squirted some onto his hands, deciding he needed to be concentrated to do this, because he could actually hurt Tom who, in hindsight, was placing a lot of trust in him. “Okay?” he asked with a smile, ignoring every one of his traitorous emotions.

“Go ahead,” Tom said, tilting his chin back a bit. Harry spread the shaving foam onto his cheeks and neck in a thin coat, as Tom really didn’t have that much stubble.

Once he’d wiped his hands off, Harry took up the razor, hoping his hands weren’t shaking too much. He pushed his glasses up his nose and turned back to Tom. “Tell me if anything’s wrong,” he said, before taking a quick breath and focusing on the task at hand, ignoring as best he could how close he was to Tom who didn’t seem to mind staring at Harry while he worked.

Harry reached out and held onto the side of Tom's neck, his fingers threading through the short strands of hair he could reach to steady himself. He made sure Tom was still before he brought the razor up to his cheek and dragged it down, ignoring how fast his heart was beating with the exhilaration of it.

Apparently, Harry might have had a bit of a thing for sharp objects. And that was something he would not be unpacking any time soon.

Soon enough, Harry was completely engrossed in the task, only allowing himself a couple seconds at a time to study Tom's high cheekbones, or the flutter of his pulse, or his crooked nose, or his full lips, or the fleck of gold in his brown eyes, or the sharpness in his jaw that rivalled that of the razor.

"Okay, let me do your jaw," he said at one point, tilting Tom's chin back with his thumb, his fingers wrapped around the back of his neck. He only realised Tom's hands had somehow ended up on his upper thighs when his fingers squeezed gently. Harry's breath stuttered but he ignored it, trying to ignore the fact that he'd slipped further into Tom's lap as well.

But since he'd noticed, it was impossible to ignore how Tom's fingers flexed on his thighs—almost arse for how high up he was holding—every time Harry scraped the razor against his skin.

"Okay, I think that's it," Harry said quietly, reaching behind himself to grab the towel before patting it against Tom's cheeks and neck. He scraped the razor down a couple more times, catching bits of stubble he'd initially missed. He let his fingers brush against Tom's bottom lip, felt the rush of blood fuelling his flush in his throat as he pressed the blade under his jaw.

"Good?" Tom asked, his voice an octave deeper than it usually was, scratchy and rough.

Harry nodded, checking over his skin once more, just because he could. "Yeah," he said eventually, setting the razor and towel down behind himself and grabbing the aftershave. He let some drop into his palm and rubbed his hands together before framing Tom's face with them, pressing the aftershave into the skin of his cheeks, jaw, and neck. He gave him a grin as he wiped his hands on the towel. "All done," he said happily, feeling giddy with what had transpired.

"Thank you, Harry," Tom said with a smirk, his teeth visible between his lips. His hands moved up to Harry's waist intently, squeezing subtly before letting go.

Harry smiled, taking it as his cue to get off. He was reluctant to do so, but he consoled himself by holding onto Tom's shoulders to climb off his lap and take the seat beside him again.

"Have you two finished pruning each other like fucking monkeys?" Theo said, looking over at them.

"Shut up Theo," Tom said with an eye roll before Harry could contest.

"Is everyone ready then?" Harry asked instead of acknowledging Theo's jibe.

“I think so,” Gaspar replied. “People should be arriving any minute. I’m not sure if they’re all coming together or separately.”

“What time is it?” Rick asked.

“Half nine,” Alphard replied. “I’ll go put some coffee on.”

“Best pack all this up,” Rick said, taking the razor and everything else from the table before traipsing upstairs.

“Do we have time for a joint?” Theo asked.

“Even if we did, the smell would stick,” Tom said. No sooner had he finished talking there was a knock on the door.

Harry stilled, curious.

“Are we sure this is the right place?” he heard from outside, and he was on his feet in a second, giddy with hearing Hermione’s voice again.

The other boys watched him with a funny look as he raced across the room to the front door, wrenching it open. There stood Ron, Hermione, and Remus, all bundled up in thick winter clothing. They startled when he opened the door but not a second later they were all grinning, Hermione throwing herself into his arms with a delighted laugh.

“Harry!” she exclaimed, making him stagger back into the building with the force of her embrace.

He laughed, wrapping his arms around her waist and lifting her up. “Hello,” he said, the delight clear in his voice. “Come in, come in,” he urged as he set her back down. He grinned as he caught Ron’s eye, a second passing between them before he lunged at him, catching him in a forceful hug.

“Hiya, mate,” Ron said happily, squeezing back just as tight.

“It’s so good to see you,” Harry said with a grin as he pulled back. He could hardly believe they were here. He turned to Remus who was smiling at him fondly, and wrapped his arms around his waist, accepting the hug that was offered. “And Uncle Moony, thanks for coming.”

Remus laughed, roughing up his hair. “Of course I’d come, you idiot.”

Harry grinned, ushering them further into the chapel and clicking the door shut behind them. “Come in, it’s freezing outside.”

“Hello everyone,” Remus greeted as he entered the library, shrugging his coat off, his boots resounding against the wooden floor.

“Hi,” Gaspar squeaked, looking to be in some sort of state of shock.

Harry laughed, dragging Ron and Hermione in with him after taking their coats from them. "This is Ron, this is Hermione," he said, motioning to his friends, "and this is Remus, though I'm fairly certain you all know him."

He moved around the room, leaving his friends' side. "This is Abraxas," he introduced, motioning to him as he waved politely. "This is Gaspar, who's a big fan of yours Remus—"

"*Don't* embarrass me, Harry," Gaspar hissed through his panic.

Harry only laughed. "This is Theo," he said, setting his hands on his shoulders.

"Lovely to meet you," Theo said, getting up to go and shake their hands politely.

"And this is Tom," Harry said, his hands skirting along his shoulders as he moved behind him. He nodded politely, his fingers clearly itching for a cigarette. "Oh, and this is Rick," he added as he emerged from upstairs.

"Morning, hi," Rick said happily, shaking all their hands. "Lovely to meet you," he said as he got to Hermione, "what's your name? Hermione is it?"

"Hermione is Ron's girlfriend," Harry said quickly, disbelieving.

"You're sick in the head, Richard," Theo said with a laugh. "Unhand the young lady."

Rick only grinned apologetically. "My apologies, darling," he said, bending down and pressing a kiss to her hand before letting go with a charming smile.

Ron had wide eyes but he looked amused whilst Hermione looked completely taken aback, a small blush spreading across her cheeks as she inched closer to Ron.

"Don't mind him," Theo said with a smile as he sat back down. "He's deranged."

"He hasn't seen a woman in a while," Abraxas supplied.

"Yes, so long in fact he sometimes mistakes Gaspar for one," Theo added teasingly.

"That was *one time*!" Rick complained, throwing a lighter across the table at Theo.

"Stop bringing that up," Gaspar said, his cheeks flaming.

Harry rolled his eyes, turning back to Remus and his friends. "There's Alphard too, I think he's in the kitchen."

"I'm here," Alphard said, emerging from the other room with a pot of coffee he set on the table before shaking hands in greeting.

"Sirius's nephew," Harry explained.

"Nice to see you again," Remus said with a smile as he shook his hand. "You've grown up since I last saw you."

Alphard grinned. “I remember, you were there sometimes when I’d come and see Sirius.”

“Will your parents be coming?” Remus asked.

“Er—no.”

“Thank God,” Remus said with a small laugh. “I always hated them.”

Alphard laughed, surprised. “Yeah, people don’t tend to like them that much,” he said, rubbing his hand behind his neck self-consciously.

“Coffee?” Harry asked, gesturing for them to sit down at the large table, which they did.

“Are we allowed to smoke here?” Remus asked, pulling a cigarette from behind his ear.

“Yeah, well, we do anyway,” Harry said with a grin, pouring them some coffee.

“You shouldn’t,” Hermione said, looking disapproving. “What with all these books, if they don’t catch on fire they’ll stink for centuries to come.”

“It gives them life, ‘mione,” Harry said with a grin, having missed Hermione’s constant reprimands.

“Are you nervous?” Remus asked, looking over at them all.

Harry nodded. “A bit,” he said, trying to ignore the squirming in his stomach.

“I think in seventh year your dad and Sirius got, er—what’s it called? The one about the guy,” he said vaguely with a smile.

“*Richard III*?” Harry prompted, remembering, not from Remus’s description, but from Sirius’s recountings.

“That’s the one,” Remus said with a grin. “Who’s playing Hamlet then? The star of the show?”

Harry grinned. “That would be Tom,” he said, gesturing to the seat beside him where Tom was sitting, smoking his own cigarette.

Remus smiled at him. “You must be nervous, all those lines.”

Tom shrugged. “I should be fine.”

“He’s brilliant,” Harry said, maybe a touch too excited, “we’ve done loads of runs now where he hasn’t forgotten a single line.”

“That’s really impressive,” Hermione said, looking at Tom, her eyes tracking over him. “I read the play last night, to refresh my memory, and I actually wondered how it was possible to remember it all.”

“It takes practice,” Tom replied, his smile just on the edge of tight.

“Oh,” Ron said suddenly, looking at Harry and tapping the table, “we ran into Oliver the other day, he was asking about you.”

Harry felt his cheeks flush red. “Was he?” he said weakly.

“Oh, is that the rugby lad, Harry?” Rick asked, giving him a smirk.

“No, that’s—”

“You’ve told them about Jason?” Ron asked, looking surprised and amused.

“No, not really—”

“Oliver *and* Jason?” Theo said with a deprecating whistle. “Bit of a slag, aren’t we, Harry?”

“Oh shut up,” Harry said with an embarrassed laugh. “I’m not.”

“You are a bit though, mate,” Ron said, very unhelpfully though he looked delighted. “Weren’t you juggling like three boyfriends at one point?”

Harry’s mouth moved silently while Theo choked on his laughter. “No, they weren’t my boyfriends,” he said, face flaming. “And will you *shut up*,” he said to Ron who only grinned at him.

“Keep it together when my brother gets here, won’t you, Harry?” Rick teased.

“Who’s his brother?” Hermione asked curiously.

“Chris Lestrange,” Rick supplied with a smirk.

“Oh! You fancied him!” Hermione exclaimed, turning back to Harry whose face crumpled while the others laughed raucously.

Remus frowned, as if he was trying to remember something before he said, rather triumphantly, “Oh! The poster in your room? The shirtless one, that’s him, right?” which set off another round of teasing for Harry.

“Please, shut up,” Harry implored.

“Are all your families coming?” Ron asked when the laughter had died down. Most nodded and Ron’s eyes widened. “Alright,” he said shakily, “this is gonna be such a weird day.”

“Are you not used to, you know, famous people?” Theo asked, cringing at his wording.

“No,” Hermione replied, “obviously we know Sirius and Remus, but, no offence,” she placed a hand on Remus’s arm, “the novelty of that wore off ages ago.”

Remus snorted, nodding his head. “Fair,” he said.

“We’re just normal people really,” Hermione went on, “we met Harry by chance, and we had no idea who he was or who his family were.”

“When did you meet?” Theo asked curiously.

“We were twelve, I think,” Hermione said, “just at school, Harry had switched to our school that year.”

“You switched schools?” Alphard asked, looking at Harry.

Harry nodded, sheepish. “I—er, yeah I was expelled from the other one.”

“What? Why?” Theo asked.

“Well the other school, the one I got expelled from, I went there with my cousin who was pretty mean to me. He and his friends would bully me, and one day—I was pretty angry—I beat him up with a baseball bat and broke his leg,” he explained with a guilty grin.

Tom snorted beside him, the first time Harry had actually heard him do so. He caught his eye and they shared an amused look. The others were laughing incredulously, looking at him with wide eyes.

“Good thing Dumbledore stopped our argument then,” Tom said with a smile that felt like it was just for Harry.

“Shut up,” Harry said with a grin. “I’d’ve only punched you.”

Tom cocked an eyebrow, crossing his arms across his chest, looking amused. “I would’ve liked to see you try.”

Harry laughed, it was both nervous and giddy. He had no idea if he and Tom were flirting, having trouble distinguishing between flirty and friendly banter. He actually had no idea if Tom even fancied *boys*.

A knock sounded at the door and they all looked towards it. The clock on the wall said it was ten o’clock, so the rest were bang on time.

It was Rick who got up to open it, propelling the small chapel into a chaotic mess of greetings as everyone piled in. Introductions were made, warm hugs between family members were exchanged, and old industry friends caught up with each other. Harry couldn’t help but glance at Alphard and Tom who weren’t expecting anyone, only having to put up with everyone else’s family. It must have been somewhat lonely and alienating.

“Hi, you’re Harry, right?”

Harry turned at the tap on his shoulder, his heart stopping as he tilted his chin up to find Chris Lestrange looking at him with a kind smile. He nodded mutely.

“Rick said you were a fan, it’s great to meet you! It’s not ‘round here that you find rugby fans.”

Harry took the hand he was holding out and shook it, swallowing heavily in the process. “It’s brilliant to meet you,” he managed to say, somewhat breathless. “You were amazing in the

Six Nations last year."

Chris laughed, clapping him on the shoulder. "You play?"

"I used to, in school," Harry said, standing up a bit straighter.

"What position? Let me guess, wing?" he said with a grin after looking Harry up and down.

Harry laughed, nodding. "Is it 'cause I'm short?"

Chris grinned, squeezing his shoulder. "Yeah but you look fast, and you've clearly got some shoulders to you."

Harry's shoulder was swamped under his hand. He was truly massive, he had Rick's height but was bulky, his nose crooked, as if it had been broken multiple times. He was the perfect picture of a rugby player.

"Sorry to interrupt," Tom said, sidling up next to them, his hand going to Harry's lower back like it did whenever he'd usher him out onto the stage, "but your friend is asking after you, Harry."

"Oh," Harry said, his full attention snapping to Tom as if his teenage crush wasn't standing next to him. "Hermione?" he asked, looking around, seeing that only she was looking in his direction.

"That's the one," Tom said with a smile, pulling Harry away from Chris minutely, whose hand dropped from his shoulder.

"I'd best go see what she wants then," he said, turning back to Chris, "I'll see you around."

"Will do, Harry," Chris said with a curious grin. "I'll get you that autograph at some point."

"Brilliant," Harry said, grinning, his cheeks flushing. "What did she want? Did she say?" he asked, looking up at Tom from where he was tucked under his arm as they walked across the room.

"She didn't, no, I'll be back," he said, looking off before letting go of Harry and retreating from the room.

Harry frowned as he made his way over to Hermione, looking over his shoulder to where Tom had run off to. "Tom said you wanted something, 'mione?" he said, smiling at her.

She hummed, looking him over with that stare of hers that made Harry feel like she could see through him. "I'm sure he did," she said with a smile.

"What?" Harry said, his brows furrowed in confusion.

"How is it going then, Harry?" she asked, a glimmer in her eyes that Harry didn't like the look of. "Have you set your sights on anyone?"

“What?” he repeated stupidly. He rolled his eyes. “I don’t fancy Christopher anymore, Hermione.”

Hermione laughed, taking a sip of coffee. “I am *not* talking about the rugby player, Harry.”

“Who are you talking about then?” he said, crossing his arms. She’d spent a total of thirty minutes with them, witnessing two interactions between him and Tom, there was no way she’d caught onto Harry’s attraction.

“Oh, Harry Potter, you know *exactly* who I’m talking about,” she snapped, crossing her arms like Harry had, locking them in some kind of face off.

“I don’t,” Harry said petulantly.

“I take it you don’t think it’s mutual then?” she said, raising an eyebrow. “Well, you’re mistaken.”

“Hermione, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Harry whispered harshly. He wasn’t actually mad, and Hermione wasn’t actually condescending. They got told they acted and bickered like siblings a lot of the time.

“Don’t I?” she hissed, stepping into his space. “You’re wearing the same aftershave. And it’s not yours.”

Harry’s jaw dropped and he sputtered. “We helped each other shave with one of those sharp razors,” he said, his cheeks flaming. “It was the only aftershave on hand.”

Hermione looked far too smug for Harry’s liking. “So not only do you know *exactly* who I’m talking about, but you ‘help each other shave’? Alright, Harry,” she said, as if the argument was settled.

“Oh, don’t forget to mention,” Theo said, popping up from seemingly thin air, “that you were sitting in his lap while you did that.”

Harry gawked at him, his eyes flicking between him and Hermione. “It was convenient!” he exclaimed, louder than was strictly necessary.

Theo and Hermione shared a look as if they’d been friends forever, and Harry couldn’t help but think that it was a terrible idea to have them meet.

“Yes, convenient, I’m sure,” Hermione said, biting back a smile.

“Wait ‘til you see the play,” Theo said with a grin. “Keep in mind, anything you see on stage is *all them*, there was no instruction to act like that.”

Hermione’s eyes lit up with interest. “Oh, I can’t wait,” she said, looking gleeful.

“For the last fucking time,” Harry snapped, no real bite behind his words, only embarrassment, “there is *nothing* going on between us.”

“Yes and Ron didn’t audibly *squeak* when he shook Mrs. Lestrange’s hand,” Hermione said with an eye roll.

Harry paused, unable to quell the amused grin stretching across his lips. “Did he actually?” he asked.

Hermione snorted, dropping her arms to her sides. “He *did*, it was so embarrassing.”

Harry laughed, leaning against the table. “Did he go bright red?”

Hermione gave him a look. “Of course he did, as pink as a salmon.”

Harry snorted, shaking his head. He looked out over the people gathered and spotted Ron talking to Alphard. They were probably bitching about how annoying Harry was as a roommate.

“Where’s Tom run off to anyway?” Theo asked, looking up at the first floor.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know, he just said he’d be back.”

“Probably avoiding the lie he spun to get you away from Christopher,” Hermione mumbled.

“What lie?” Theo asked, ever so keen on gossip.

Hermione smirked. “He told Harry I was looking for him, or I wanted something, to get him away from Christopher. I, of course, never did.”

“What?” Harry said while Theo laughed.

“He did that to me, you know?” Theo said, shaking his head in disbelief. “When I gave you a hug ‘cause you were upset about Sirius, remember he told me Alphard wanted something from me? Well, he didn’t.”

Harry’s heart stuttered but he beat it back down, shaking his head. “I think you’re both reading into this.”

Theo went to protest but Hermione interrupted him gently. “Don’t bother,” she said, “Harry will be oblivious until the last second. He refuses to acknowledge when people fancy him.”

“He does *not* fancy me,” Harry argued, his face flaming.

“Whatever you say, Harry,” she said, eyeing him. “I’d best go see what Ron’s up to.”

Harry watched her go before turning wide eyes on Theo who only raised his hands in surrender and said, “I can’t legally give my opinion on this matter, as I have been threatened with a brutal death in the event that I did.”

“*What*?” Harry said, confused beyond belief. Theo just shrugged and wandered off, leaving Harry to blink in utter confusion. He’d just write everything about this encounter off as Theo and Hermione being weird.

“Hi Harry,” Remus said, sidling up beside him, a new cigarette having been placed behind his ear.

Harry smiled, putting Theo and Hermione out of his mind. He’d try casting Tom out of his mind too, but that had never worked before, he didn’t see why it would at that moment in time. “Do you know anyone?”

Remus hummed. “Lorraine, it’s always nice to catch up with her,” he said, gesturing to Rick’s mum. “I know her husband too, though not that much, and the Averys. The rest of them would be more up Sirius’s alley but we’ve crossed paths a couple times.”

“It’s weird, I’ve always seen these people on magazine covers, and now they’re here,” Harry commented, scrunching his nose up. It was strange, coming face to face with the fact that these people were real and existed outside of their films or interviews or photoshoots.

Lorraine Lestrange was simply beautiful, and she seemed lovely. Her husband was loud but smiley, he had kind eyes which Rick had inherited. Both boys looked a lot like their father, though Rick had inherited his mother’s sharp cheekbones.

The Averys looked quite severe, though it could have just been that they were reserved. They looked like they didn’t know what to do with their hands, as if without an instrument between their fingers they were lost. Mrs. Avery was taller than her husband, her hair pulled back in a bun and her posture perfect. Gaspar had inherited his father’s stature but he looked the spitting image of his mother otherwise. It made him look delicate and dreamy.

The Malfoys looked like the perfect picture of movie stars. They both had long blonde hair that they’d passed on to Abraxas. Their bone structure was perfect and they held themselves with an elegance that just had to be practised, Harry didn’t understand how it could be natural. They looked like they expected cameras to start flashing at any second, their smiles bright and lingering.

The Notts brightened the room though, especially Mrs. Nott who looked much more casual and at ease than any of the other adults. Her husband had a perpetual frown fighting to pull his eyebrows down but he maintained a polite smile, his small talk fleeting and to the point. Mrs. Nott laughed happily, talking loudly and with everyone. She fussed around Theo while his sister watched with an amused smile. Theo and his sister looked a lot alike, both of them keeping their father’s droopy eyes but their mother’s laughter lines.

Harry found himself wishing Tom had his parents here. He wanted to dissect and analyse each of their features that he’d taken on, which were his own, and which had been passed down to him. He wanted to know if his crooked nose was natural or if he’d previously broken it. He wanted to know if his parents were tall, if their eyes were speckled with a fleck of gold, if their fingers were long and skeletal, if their hair curled softly, if their smiles bordered on cruel but smoothed out whenever they were sleepy.

Harry vaguely wondered what his parents would look like amongst these people. Who his mother would talk to, if she’d know any of them, if perhaps they’d worked together. He wondered if his dad would be the loudest in the room, if he’d slap everyone on the shoulder, giving them his signature grin, if he’d wink at Harry from across the room.

He swallowed quickly, looking down as he took a breath, that familiar weight of grief threatening his chest.

“I have a letter for you,” Remus said, pulling the paper out from his pocket. “It’s from Sirius of course, he wanted me to give it to you before the play. I haven’t read it, but it’s up to you if you want to read it now or later on.”

Harry took the letter dazedly, unsure of whether it was a good idea to read it now or not. He ended up caving, thinking it best to read it now in case it made him sad, he wouldn’t want it affecting his acting. He unfolded the paper, immediately recognising Sirius’s elegant cursive though it looked a bit shaky.

Hi kiddo!

I’m really sorry I can’t be there for the play, I’m really devastated, but it’s only giving me more motivation to get better so I can make it to the end of year one!

I’m sure you’ll be brilliant — though I’ll get to see that for myself, since Remus has promised to record it for me. I know it’s against the rules at Hogwarts but Remus knows how to be discreet, don’t worry. And, it’ll only be a fun embarrassing memory if your uncle gets thrown out of the theatre.

I won’t burden you with an in depth status update, but I’m doing better. The withdrawals are over and I’m just focusing on getting over the urge. It’ll take a while but I’m sure I’ll get there.

I’m sorry I won’t be there for Christmas, Moony says you’re staying at school, I hope you won’t be alone. I’ll get a phone call on the 25th so I’ll ring you then, make sure you’re in!

I miss you so much and I can’t wait to see you again. You’ll be an amazing Horatio, I hope you’re not too nervous. You’ll be the star of the show — the star of my show anyway.

I love you, Harry, and I hope to see you soon. Good luck! I’m proud of you, son.

Love,

Sirius xx

Harry clenched his jaw in an attempt to keep the lump in his throat from manifesting itself through a sob and tears. “Fuck,” he muttered, pressing his fingers into his eyes and clearing his throat, chasing away the emotion.

Remus wrapped an arm around his shoulders, holding him close. “Wanker,” he murmured, amusement in his voice, “I bet he wants me to get thrown out, he’d get a right laugh out of it.”

Harry laughed, leaning into Remus as he folded the letter back up. “It’s probably a set up,” he managed to say, the worst of his almost-tears having passed, though he was sure his face was blotchy with the effort it took to keep them at bay.

“It definitely is,” Remus said with a grin. “I’ll do it anyway.”

“I’ll go put this upstairs,” Harry said, gesturing to the letter. He didn’t want to risk losing it or it getting damaged.

Once he was up in his room he found one of his notebooks that he used to store important stuff and slipped the letter in between two pages. He took a second to breathe, surprised by the heaviness in his heart at having both Sirius and his parents missing.

“Everything okay?”

He turned to see Tom in the doorway, and he gave him a quick smile, standing up from where he’d been kneeling on the floor. “Yeah fine, is this where you ran off to? To your room? Are you okay?”

“You look like you’ve been crying,” Tom said quietly, frowning as he stepped further into the room. He ignored everything Harry had said.

“I haven’t,” Harry replied, even though it wasn’t a lie he felt like he had to explain himself, so he went on. “It’s just—Sirius passed on a letter to Remus and it made me a bit emotional, that’s all. But I didn’t actually cry.”

“But you wanted to,” Tom said, standing only a couple feet away from Harry.

Harry shrugged. “Yeah, a bit.”

“Best if you don’t,” Tom said, his fingers trailing on Harry’s bed frame, “keep it all for tonight. You can cry when I’m dead.”

Harry laughed, walking past Tom who didn’t move to accommodate him, and placed the notebook on his desk. “I will do,” he said, and it was a promise—a promise to be good, to be good enough.

Tom smiled, looking curiously around the room, though his eyes only stuck to Harry’s side of the space. “You like novels,” he remarked, picking Harry’s copy of *The Secret History* up and flicking through it.

“I do,” Harry said, watching him curiously. “Do you?”

“Sometimes,” he replied, placing the book back down, his fingers running along the spines of other books. “You draw,” he stated, his finger toying with the page of one of Harry’s notebooks, peeking inside.

“Sometimes,” Harry said, amused at Tom’s quiet prying. “Do you?”

“Not really. You write.”

“Very rarely,” Harry said, cringing at the notebook Tom was touching, knowing exactly how embarrassing some of the things his younger self had written were. “Do you?”

“Yes,” Tom replied easily, peaking at some of the photos Harry had on his desk.

“What do you write about?” Harry asked, seizing the opportunity he had.

Tom turned back to him, a private smile on his face. “Anything.”

“Mysterious.”

“I am.”

“You’re mysterious?” Harry said with a laugh, conscious of the fact that he was angling his body against the desk in a way a thirteen year old girl flirting with her crush would either approve of or absolutely cringe at.

“You don’t think I’m mysterious?” Tom asked with a small smile, mock-offended.

“A bit,” Harry said truthfully. “Actually I’d call it cryptic, not mysterious. Mystery is effortless, naturally ineffable. You try to stay mysterious, thus you’re cryptic.”

Tom’s smile was softer than it ever had been and Harry felt like he might swoon. “You think I try too hard?”

“No, it’s effortless,” Harry said, realising he wasn’t making much sense.

Tom looked pensive, smiling to himself. “You think I’m cryptic, but effortlessly?”

“Something like that,” Harry murmured, catching how his voice had gone deeper on the last syllable and shaking himself, straightening out against the desk. “We should go back downstairs,” he said, clearing his throat, “or people will start thinking we’re fucking again.”

Immediately his cheeks flared up, the flush going all the way down to his chest, and he looked up at Tom with wide eyes, wondering why the fuck he’d said that.

Tom only laughed, a deep sound that rattled Harry’s bones. “True,” he said, looking over at the door, “they do love to gossip.”

Harry laughed, pushing off the desk. “That, they do, so we’d best go back.”

Tom sighed, visibly dampening his smile, closing his face off, before nodding and manoeuvring Harry out of the room with a hand at the small of his back.

When they got downstairs Harry spotted Hermione and Theo stood together and reluctantly went over to them, Tom following behind.

“Well, well, well,” Theo said with a grin, “disappearing together. How incriminating.”

“Do shut up, Theodore,” Tom said, picking up his pack of cigarettes from the table and lighting one before offering one to Harry.

“Very defensive,” Hermione said, giving Theo a look, “how incriminating.”

Theo looked delighted, grinning at her brightly. “Are you really Ron’s girlfriend?” he asked. “Because I must admit, I’m very attracted to you.”

Tom scoffed. “You’re attracted to anything that has a chance of getting your cock hard—which is most things.”

Harry snorted, grinning up at Tom whose lips twitched up in a small smile.

“I thought you liked boys,” Hermione said, looking at Theo.

“I swing both ways, sweetheart,” Theo said with a wink. Harry cringed, feeling like he was watching his sister getting chatted up.

“He swings all ways,” Tom sniped. “Three ways even,” he added with a smirk.

Theo’s nose scrunched up. “We don’t need to bring that up.”

“What’s this?” Harry asked, happy to finally get some dirt on Theo.

“Last year Theo had a threesome with a boy and a girl from the year above,” Tom explained with a sly smirk. “He came in like thirty seconds and was so embarrassed he told me the whole thing.”

Harry laughed, surprised. “That’s rough,” he said to Theo, giving him a sympathetic smile.

“You’ve had a threesome?” Hermione asked, a twinge of interest in her voice that made Harry stare at her in absolute horror, fake gagging for dramatic effect.

“Don’t even *think* about it, ‘mione, that’s disgusting.”

Hermione glared at him. “Go away then if you’re not happy.”

“What? And let him talk you into a threesome? No way,” Harry said vehemently.

“What threesome?” Ron asked as he traipsed over, appearing at Hermione’s side.

“Oh God,” Harry grumbled. “I will kill myself if you talk about having a threesome in front of me.”

Hermione smacked him upside the head, hard enough to make his glasses slip down his nose a bit. “You aren’t allowed to say things like that,” she said sternly.

“Ow,” Harry whined, shoving his glasses back up his nose, “it was just a joke.”

“Well you aren’t allowed to joke about that,” she said.

Harry rolled his eyes, feeling chastised. “Sorry, don’t talk about having a threesome then.”

“What fucking threesome?” Ron asked, looking very confused. “I’m not having a threesome with Harry, no offence mate.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Harry grumbled, “with *Theo,* not me, you idiot. I would—” he cut off at Hermione’s warning glare— “not be happy if we had a threesome.”

“Do you not find me fit?” Ron asked, looking offended.

“Ron, how many fucking times have we had this conversation?” Harry asked, pinching the bridge of his nose. Theo cackled, his eyes wide in delight at Harry’s frustration.

Ron grinned, looping an arm around Harry’s shoulders. “I’m only taking the piss, mate.”

Harry saw Hermione and Theo share a look, their eyes flitting behind Harry where Tom was standing. He leant into Ron anyway, having missed his best friend. “Fancy a joint?” he asked.

“Oh, fucking finally!” Theo exclaimed. “Gather everyone who wants to come, I’ll get the stuff.”

Harry rolled his eyes as he watched him run off. “You up for it then?” he asked, turning to Ron and Hermione who nodded, Ron very enthusiastically and Hermione rather reluctantly. He extricated himself from Ron and turned to Tom, his hand finding his wrist as if it belonged there. “Fancy it?”

“I don’t smoke before productions,” he said with a regretful smile, though he looked a bit jittery.

“Sure?” Harry asked. “It’s only eleven, we’ll have time to sweat it out, plus we’ll be eating soon.” They’d planned to go into the village and have a big meal in one of the restaurants there, all together.

“Yeah, alright,” Tom agreed, looking relieved to be able to get out. Harry grinned, moving around the room and catching everyone else’s eyes, his friends at least, and gesturing for a smoke outside. He did it to Remus too who nodded inconspicuously while he spoke with Gaspar’s dad.

They regrouped outside, behind the chapel, Theo arriving seconds later, running faster than Harry had ever seen him run.

“Right, I’d say we’ve got about fifteen minutes until my mum wonders where I am. We need three joints, Harry you’re quickest roll, roll one, I’ll do one, and Tom, please for the love of Christ roll one for us,” Theo said, pulling everything out in record time.

“No, I don’t want to,” Tom said, just to be contrary, Harry assumed. It made him smile.

“I’ll do it,” Remus said with a grin. “I must be pretty good if Harry’s the fastest of you all. I did teach him after all.” He winked at Harry who sent him a cheeky grin.

“He taught you how to roll a joint?” Gaspar asked, awestruck. Harry nodded, amused. Gaspar marched up to him and gripped his t-shirt. “I want to be you,” he said, pressing upon every word. Harry laughed, startled, as did the others.

“Are you a fan?” Remus asked with a kind smile, already almost finished with rolling the joint.

Gaspar stepped back, smiling shyly. “I really am,” he said.

“Fancy an autograph?” Remus asked, lighting up the joint that he’d somehow already rolled.

“I would love one, actually,” Gaspar replied, his grin bright.

“Alright,” Remus conceded, pulling out a notebook and a pen, “*but*, on the condition that I get you all to sign me an autograph, stating which roles you have in the play.”

“Really?” Gaspar said, stars in his eyes. “You’d want our autograph?”

“Of course,” Remus said with a grin. “Gaspar is it? Anything in particular you’d like me to write?”

“Er—no, no, anything, I don’t know,” Gaspar stuttered out, his cheeks bright red with a blush.

Remus smiled, propping the notebook against the chapel wall and bringing up his pen. Harry peaked over as he lit his joint and read, *To Gaspar, nice name! Good luck for tonight, I’m sure you’ll be brilliant in the play, can’t wait to see you on stage. Moony xx*

He ripped it out of his notebook and handed it over, watching in amusement as Gaspar read it, clearly refraining from jumping up and down.

Tom tapped Harry’s shoulder while Gaspar launched into a million renditions of ‘thank you’ and held his fingers out expectantly.

Harry grinned, taking a pull on the joint. “You should’ve rolled,” he said, watching as Tom’s eyebrows pulled up, looking at Harry in that unimpressed way of his. “Now you’ve got to wait your turn.”

“You’re just being annoying,” Tom murmured. “You’ve had it long enough.”

“You didn’t even want to smoke,” Harry reminded him, a smirk pulling at his lips. He wondered idly if it was even possible for him to address Tom without falling into embarrassing flirting.

“Wanker,” Tom whispered while Harry took another drag. He laughed when Tom reached out and plucked the joint from his lips. He blew the smoke at him in retaliation, watching him bat away the dense cloud. “I’ll smell of weed now,” he complained.

“Should’ve rolled,” Harry replied absentmindedly, still so fascinated by the sight of Tom placing the joint between his lips that had previously been between Harry’s.

They were interrupted by Theo clicking his fingers in their faces. “Sorry to interrupt but we’re on the clock here, so if you two love birds could *share* the fucking joint instead of passing it between yourselves like some kind of token of your affections to one another—”

Harry smacked him upside the head at the same time as Tom did, rattling his skull under both their palms.

“Do shut up, Theodore,” Tom drawled, twisting his ear harshly as he pulled his hand away.

“Yes, please shut up,” Harry said, embarrassment burning under his skin.

“Here,” Tom said, lifting the joint to Harry’s lips and holding it there while he inhaled, before doing the same to himself and passing it on to Hermione. Harry found it endearingly romantic and had to actively focus to not cough on the smoke.

“Ow, Jesus Christ,” Theo said, cradling his head in his hands.

“You were looking for it,” Tom said, unapologetic. “I’ve told you to shut up at least three times today about that.”

“Sorry sorry,” Theo huffed, rubbing at his ear.

“This is pretty good,” Remus commented, gesturing to the joints being passed around. “Does everyone still buy from the art students?”

“Yep,” Rick said, passing his joint on to Alphard. “We buy from a girl called Luna, once she sold me a tab of ecstasy and I swear I met God.”

Alphard snorted beside him. “Yeah, well, you almost met the Hospital as well. You scared the shit out of us.”

“Do you often do hard drugs?” Remus asked casually, though Harry could tell he was hoping the answer was no.

“No, no,” Theo replied. “We haven’t taken any this year, we messed about a bit last year but it was mainly to test stuff out. But they were one offs. I think Rick took the ecstasy ‘cause he wanted to hook up with one of the art students.”

“Yeah, she was called Rebecca,” Rick said with a grin.

“But even then, I think only Rick, Theo, and Gaspar ever tried stuff,” Alphard said.

“Yeah it was rubbish really, felt like shit afterwards,” Rick said with a shrug.

Gaspar nodded. “I had a panic attack and had to sleep in Alphard’s bed, so I never did anything again.”

“I did a couple stuff,” Theo said, looking pensive. “But they affect me really weirdly, remember when I took that cocaine and didn’t sleep for like forty-eight hours—”

“And you went on for hours and hours about how the Greek Gods were definitely real?” Abraxas supplied with a laugh.

“Yeah, exactly,” Theo said with a funny look. “Weird time.”

Remus laughed. “Yeah, well, there’s nothing wrong with having fun. You all seem quite responsible anyway, I’m not worried.”

“Have you ever taken anything, Harry?” Theo asked curiously.

“Nope,” Harry said confidently.

“You almost did,” Remus said, and Harry turned to look at him sharply. “You won’t remember it, it’s really bad actually,” he looked sheepish, “has Sirius never told you?”

“Told me what?”

“When you were a toddler, we had you over for the weekend and Sirius left some cocaine on the table by accident, and you got it all over your fingers. Luckily, Sirius caught you before you could put any in your mouth. We told your parents, obviously, and it was the biggest fight your dad and Sirius ever had.”

“What, like, a proper physical fight?” Harry asked, disbelieving.

“God no,” Remus said with a laugh. “No no, Sirius was bawling his eyes out and James was shouting at him mainly. Lily didn’t speak to either of us for weeks, even though I was at work at the time and didn’t even *do* cocaine, so I had nothing to do with it.”

“How on earth did you resolve *that*?” Hermione asked.

Remus smiled. “Well, James left once he’d said everything he had to, and Lily didn’t even come ‘round. I think she knew that if she saw Sirius she’d really tear into him, and God knows Sirius has never been good with that. Anyway, James came back a couple days later and, long story short, both he and Sirius ended up crying in each other’s arms. James apologised for shouting so much and said that he was just scared, and that Sirius couldn’t be so irresponsible. And Sirius agreed to it all, he cleaned up his act a bit after that.”

“Jesus, what goes on behind closed doors, eh?” Theo said, looking over at Harry. “I can’t believe you almost snorted a load of cocaine as a toddler.”

Harry laughed, astounded at this new information about himself. “I know right.”

“Can you believe that if my parents would’ve liked Sirius a bit, we could’ve been best friends as kids?” Alphard said, looking over at Harry.

“Sirius and I always tried to get you at ours at the same time, but it never worked out,” Remus said regretfully. “Right, sign us this then,” he added with a grin as he took his notebook out again, “and then we’ll be off to the village I think.”

“Do you want me to sign it?” Ron asked teasingly as he passed the notebook over to Gaspar who was standing next to him.

“There is nothing I would want less, actually, Ronald. I don’t need a physical reminder of you,” Remus teased back.

“Don’t be mean to Ron,” Harry said with a laugh, pinching Remus’s arm.

“You’ve no idea what I’ve had to put up with, Bambi. The car ride was a nightmare.”

“Bambi?” Theo asked, looking amused.

Remus chuckled, roughing up Harry’s hair. “We had these stupid nicknames at school, I was Moony, which became my stage name, Sirius was Padfoot cause he was an absolute dog, and James was Prongs. I don’t actually remember where that came from but it was something to do with a stag do—yeah, that’s it, he’d been planning his stag do since he was like eleven, so he was Prongs. And then, Prongs has a baby, what do we call the baby? Bambi.”

“Can I call you that?” Theo asked Harry.

“Absolutely not,” Harry said with a scoff.

“Here, *Bambi*,” Tom teased, handing over the paper they’d all signed.

Harry definitely blushed, but he took the paper and checked it over. Tom had signed in the dead centre; *Tom M. Riddle, HAMLET.*

“What does the ‘M’ stand for?” Harry asked as he signed *Harry James Potter, HORATIO*, under Tom’s signature. He handed it back to Remus, though he wouldn’t have minded keeping it for himself, and they all started making their way back to the chapel, Harry and Tom dawdling at the back. They’d be leaving for the village any minute anyway, they might as well stay outside.

“Not telling.”

“Does it stand for *mysterious*?” Harry asked with a cheeky grin.

He didn’t miss the way Tom smiled before biting it off. He cleared his throat. “Actually, I’m told I’m cryptic.”

“Oh, who said that? Smart person, I’m sure.”

“Not that smart actually, because mysterious and cryptic are synonyms,” Tom said with a wry smile.

“There are nuances,” Harry replied confidently. “So, what’s the ‘M’ stand for?”

“You don’t need to know.”

“I’ll tell you what my middle name is,” Harry proposed.

“It’s James,” Tom stated, unimpressed. “Aside from the fact that I just watched you sign it, you’re very liberal about the information you give away about yourself.”

“Should I be more cryptic?”

“Exactly.”

“Is it Marvin?”

“No, and don’t start guessing,” Tom said with an exasperated look.

“Max? —Mathias? —Mathew?”

“Stop,” Tom said sharply, turning to Harry and catching his eye. “You won’t guess it, so give up.”

“Why do you sign it if you don’t want anyone to know what it is?” Harry asked curiously, unfazed by Tom’s evident annoyance.

“Because it’s my name.”

Harry looked him over with a certain amount of scepticism. “You just like to seem mysterious.”

Tom smiled, as if he couldn’t help it. He didn’t get to reply though, as all the adults piled out of the chapel wrapped up in winter coats and set off for the village. Theo’s mum was having a go at him about how tired he looked, with his eyes being red. Tom and Harry shared an amused smile when they heard it.

The rest of the day passed easily, and, as expected, having their families with them took their minds off the stress of the play. Alphard didn’t seem to mind his family being absent, happy to have a chat with Remus or with any of the other parents. Tom, on the other hand, seemed uncomfortable most of the time, as if he didn’t know how to interact with parents.

Harry understood the feeling, staying out of the way as much as he could, trying not to interact too directly with any of the adults.

— Scene eleven —

Despite the distraction of the day, evening came quickly, and with it came another round of sickening nerves. Their families left to eat in the cafeteria in the school while Harry and the other seventh years returned to the chapel. They were to get ready, which they did mechanically, helping each other with their costumes and hair.

The play was meant to start at eight o'clock, so at seven they traipsed up to the castle and entered the theatre. They hadn't eaten anything, they couldn't, far too nervous to swallow anything without it coming right back up.

"I'd kill for a smoke," Theo said anxiously. He was hovering next to where Harry was being tended to by a fifth year, there to apply light makeup.

"Do you have your contact lenses?" the girl asked kindly as she tousled his hair this way and that.

"Yeah I do," Harry replied, setting the box down. "I'd love a smoke, too."

"Do you need me to put them in for you or would you rather do it?" the girl asked.

"I'll do it," Harry said with a smile. He had yet to do *Hamlet* without his glasses, for the simple reason that he hated wearing contact lenses, he'd never grown accustomed to them and they didn't quite correct his eyesight properly. But, he always made the effort when doing the final production of a play.

Theo watched in a sort of horrified fascination as Harry put the contacts in. "Can you cry with them in?"

"Yeah," Harry said, blinking to keep them in place. "I'm always really worried I'll lose one though."

"Let Tom know before the play starts that you're not wearing your glasses, he doesn't like last minute changes, it can throw him off," Theo said, letting another fifth year boy put some makeup under his eyes.

"Okay, I'll go look for him then," Harry said, getting up and thanking the girl quickly. He assumed Tom would be lurking around somewhere near the stage. He found him, instead, near the back lodges where Harry had gone to collect himself after their argument in late November. "Hi," he said tentatively.

"Is it time or something?" Tom asked. He looked good, alright even, but Harry could see the faint panic in his eyes, could see his mind reeling, reviewing all his lines in fast-forward.

"Not yet, the theatre's just filling up," Harry said with a careful smile, leaning against the cool wall. "Theo just said you'd want me to tell you that I'm not wearing my glasses for the play, I've got contacts in. He said I should let you know so that it doesn't throw you off."

Tom looked over at him, his eyes scanning his face as if he hadn't really noticed who he was talking to beforehand. "Oh," he said, his eyes lingering on Harry's, "okay, thanks."

"Are you alright?"

"Fine," Tom replied, though the word seemed to hold a bitter taste in his mouth.

"Just nerves?" Harry prompted with a smile.

"I'm not nervous."

"'Course you are," Harry said. "You're the star of the show, every person out there will be watching *you*, listening to *you*, hearing every word you pronounce and looking out for any that you miss—" Tom's eyes widened a fraction, something like panic passing through them, and Harry smiled— "but you'll be brilliant of course. Even if you did miss a word I'm sure you'd manage to convince the entire audience that it was on purpose—though I doubt you'd need to, they're all gonna be so caught up in how you play that any mistakes will slip through. And that's if you make any at all, knowing you, you probably won't."

"Plus," Harry went on, unsure of where all this was coming from, "you love being the centre of attention, you're a bit of an attention whore."

Tom's lips parted around words that wouldn't come, and for once, he looked speechless. He laughed, and Harry could tell that the sound relieved him of a good amount of nerves. "I'm not an attention whore," he said, sounding more amused than annoyed.

"Oh please," Harry said, inspecting his nails, "*Macbeth*? You positively sulked because you didn't get the lead, even though you got, like, the coolest role."

"I'm not an attention whore."

"Drama queen then," Harry said with a shrug, grinning. Tom looked aghast, though he was definitely smiling.

"Show starts in ten minutes!" someone called from backstage.

They looked at each other, closer than they had initially been, and they both sighed.

"Will you be okay?" Tom asked, looking uncharacteristically soft.

Harry nodded, swallowing around his nerves. "Right now I can't remember a single line, but once I get out there, I'll be fine."

"I'm sure you will be," Tom murmured, and then his hands were on Harry's face, his thumbs rubbing into his cheekbones. "It's not even," he said by way of an explanation. Harry assumed he was talking about the makeup, though his hammering heart and stuttering breathing were clouding his mind.

"Okay," he whispered, though it came out as more of a shaky exhale.

“Come on then,” Tom whispered back, his thumb brushing over Harry’s bottom lip, “you’re on first.”

Harry swallowed, unable to utter a single word. He nodded mutely, an acute sense of disappointment flooding him when Tom pulled back, even if his fingers lingered on Harry’s cheek for a second.

“Okay,” Harry said shakily, desperately trying to get some of his confidence back, hoping his breathlessness could be passed off as him being nervous, “okay, let’s go.”

They walked through the backstage lodges until they were at the edge of the stage, peeking through the curtains. There were hundreds of people gathered in the theatre. He could spot Remus, Hermione, and Ron in the centre of the room, behind the other seventh year family members. The entire student body was gathered in the balconies and at the back of the room, and the front row was full of teachers and very severe looking adults.

“Who are they?” Harry asked in a whisper.

Tom leant over him, his chest pressed to his back. “The school sponsors, agents, people looking to recruit new actors, gauge potential,” he murmured in Harry’s ear. Harry didn’t know if it was what Tom had said or the fact he’d whispered it in his ear that had his heart hammering in his chest and his stomach twisting in knots.

“Five minutes!” someone called.

“There you are!” Theo said as he appeared beside them, flanked by the other boys. “Okay, we’re gonna nail this, right?”

Harry saw Tom roll his eyes which made him smile.

“‘Course we are,” Rick said, holding onto Abraxas and Alphard’s shoulders, “we’ll be brilliant, the best showing of *Hamlet* this school has ever seen.”

“If anyone forgets a line, it doesn’t matter,” Theo pressed, gathering them in a sort of huddle that reminded Harry of his rugby days. “There’s a girl at the other side of the stage, just catch her eye and she’ll mouth the line to you, alright? It doesn’t matter, just try and keep on track.”

“And if we miss any of the blocking, Tom,” Alphard said, “we don’t stop, unless, you know, you knock me out or something.”

Tom nodded, amusement passing over his features.

Someone tapped Harry on the shoulder and he turned from the huddle, where he was under Tom and Gaspar’s arms, and saw Ben.

“You ready, Harry?” the boy asked, looking white as snow.

Harry smiled at him. “I am, are you okay?”

“Fine, I just want it to be over with,” he said with a nervous laugh.

“You’ll be fine once we get out there,” Harry said, turning back to the others and giving them a quick grin. “Good luck, lads,” he said, his heart rate picking up as the lights dimmed and the crowd quietened down.

“Good luck, Harry,” Tom said, his arm still around his shoulders, pulling him into his side quickly and squeezing.

“See you on stage,” Harry said, grinning up at him, his fingers flexing where they’d ended up on his waist, before he pulled back.

Through all the nervousness, Harry felt *excited*.

He joined Ben and the other two boys he started the play with by the side of the stage, giving them an encouraging clap on the back.

“Okay Francisco, get out there, we’re opening the curtains in thirty seconds,” one of the sixth year stage directors said. “Bernardo be ready to enter, around five seconds after we open the curtains.”

Harry took a deep breath and waited.

The curtains opened and he watched the boys on the stage, awaiting his cue with bated breath. When Francisco uttered his line, Harry walked onto the stage with the boy playing Marcellus.

“*Friends to this ground*,” he said in response to the previous line, and all his nerves melted away. As always, his memory did not fail him, his lines came easily and his movements easier. He had a lot of lines in the first scene but he stuttered over none, wearing the character of Horatio like a second skin having become second nature over the last few months.

When he exited the stage with the other boys, all of his nerves had evaporated, sharing a giddy smile with Theo as they crossed paths on his way onto the stage.

Harry stayed on the sidelines, watching and waiting for his cue. Theo had tirade after tirade to do, and he did well, not once did he slouch or appear bored. He looked like a King, and spoke like one too.

But it was Tom who really captivated the audience. Harry felt it, as soon as he turned to them and uttered his first line, “*A little more than kin, and less than kind,*” they understood why they were sat in the theatre, why they’d chosen to come and watch a four hour long play.

While his first line was short, the rest were not. He had long monologues where he was alone on stage and, as always, Harry could not take his eyes off him.

“*[...] But break, my heart; for I must hold my tongue*.”

Harry didn’t even check to see if the other boys were behind him, itching to get on stage with Tom, he walked on. “*Hail to your lordship!*” he exclaimed, revelling in the way Tom immediately turned to him, his full attention on Horatio, on *Harry*.

Harry didn't know how he did it, how he managed to portray such genuine affection in his eyes, as he spoke his lines almost playfully.

They bounced off each other, gravitating towards one another in the odd sort of dance they always ended up doing when they were on stage together. One of them would take a step forward, the other a step back.

Their stichomythia was Harry's favourite, getting to speak fast, their lines succeeding one another as if they were taking turns at reading lines in a monologue. It was when they got to engage with each other, really feel the words rolling between them.

They exited the stage, Harry before Tom who had a few lines to pronounce alone, and shared in a quick grin before watching the third scene between Abraxas, Alphard, and Viola.

They entered together for the fourth scene, Tom's hand on Harry's lower back directing him onto the stage. It was such an intimate thing to do in front of so many people but Harry didn't have time to think about it too much as their dialogue started as soon as they stepped into the light, an air of anticipation and urgency to them induced by the setting of the scene.

They spoke, their words that of forced casualness as they looked around compulsively, *waiting* for the Ghost to come out. Honestly, Harry thought they were very good actors, for their age, at least.

He and Marcellus watched Tom exit the stage after Rick, and got through their small dialogue before following. Harry watched Tom and Rick reenter the stage and perform brilliantly, the horror of the revelations shining in Tom's eyes.

They called out to Hamlet while Rick disappeared, from the sidelines of the stage, before entering themselves. Harry realised it was the last scene of the first Act, and was vaguely reluctant to end it. He had very few scenes with Tom throughout the rest of the play.

They spoke to each other, Tom looking frazzled and Harry appearing worried and confused.

"*And therefore as a stranger give it welcome. / There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy*; *[...]*" Tom spoke, his eyes intent on Harry. There was always something about hearing Tom call him *Horatio* that made Harry's heart skip a beat.

As he got to the end of his tirade he clasped Harry's hands in his, beckoning Marcellus over, and asked them to swear they would not speak of what they had seen. They did, as they always did, and Tom smiled, nodding.

He went on, his eyes never leaving Harry;

"*So, gentlemen,*
With all my love I do commend me to you:
And what so poor a man as Hamlet is
May do, to express his love and friending to you,
God willing, shall not lack. Let us go in together;

And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!
Nay, come, let's go together."

Harry was thankful for Tom's hands in his because it always came as a shock when he pronounced those words: *with all my love*, while looking into Harry's very soul.

They exited the stage together, Tom's hand snaking down to Harry's lower back. And Act I was over.

"Well?" Harry said in an excited whisper, his whole right side still pressed into Tom with all the people gathered backstage.

Tom looked down at him with a sparkle in his eyes. "Brilliant," he replied, his fingers gripping Harry's waist.

Harry wanted to wrap his arms around his shoulders and drag him down for a kiss. He only smiled, saying, "Not too tired?"

"Not yet," Tom said, his eyes flitting over to the stage as the curtains reopened and Abraxas entered the stage.

"There's the party afterwards," Harry murmured, very pleased with the fact that he was still pressed up against Tom.

He hummed, setting his chin on Harry's head unexpectedly, making him laugh. "I might not make it to the party," he said, and Harry could hear the smile in his voice.

"You'll be fine," he said, boldly patting Tom's abdomen gently, biting back a groan as he felt how firm it was.

"We'll see," he whispered, leaning more heavily on him.

Harry was struck by what they were doing. There they were, stood just off the stage, entirely wrapped in an embrace that anyone with eyes would call a *hug*. He bit his lip to try and quell the grin spreading across his face that was pressed to Tom's chest, and could only hope that Theo wasn't around to witness this.

They watched silently as the first scene of Act II came to a close and the second one started. When Theo went past them he sent them a very funny look but he didn't say anything. It was calming, and Harry felt like time started acting normally again instead of the whirlwind it had been ever since the evening had begun.

"That's me," Tom murmured into Harry's hair as Theo and some of the others started exiting the stage. He disentangled himself from Harry, though he gave him a smile before he left, taking the prop that was being handed to him.

Harry reciprocated, feeling oddly cold without the solidness of Tom to press up against. He watched as the scene played out, giving Gaspar an encouraging smile as he stood beside him

awaiting his cue.

“You’re staying here over the holidays, right?”

Harry turned from where he’d been watching Tom to see Theo standing beside him. “Yeah, why?”

Theo didn’t look at him, his eyes trained on the stage. “His birthday is the 31st of December,” he said quietly. “He won’t tell you and he won’t mention it the day of, I thought you might want to know.”

“Oh,” Harry said, taken aback. “Would he want me to do something for his birthday?” he asked, already knowing, almost intuitively, that Tom would definitely not want that.

Theo shrugged. “Honestly, everything I know about Tom has gone to complete shit since you’ve come into the picture. I don’t think he’d want anything big, but he’d probably appreciate a ‘happy birthday’.”

Harry blinked, unsure of what to make of that. “What do you mean?”

Theo turned to look at him for the first time since he’d appeared, only giving him a small smile before he looked away again.

Harry turned back to the stage, his mind having trouble focusing on what was being said, a frown on his face.

“Now I am alone,” Tom said, alone on the stage, gearing up for his monologue that would put an end to Act II.

And Harry thought, *I don’t want you to be alone*. How many birthdays and Christmases had he spent alone in the castle? Or at the orphanage? Harry frowned, watching the boy he wanted the most in the world, like he’d never wanted anyone before, act his heart out, for an audience that didn’t know him.

Harry vowed to know him, to not let go until he knew what Tom Riddle was made up of.

“Now I’m tired,” Tom stated as he exited the stage and the curtain closed, signalling the end of the second Act. He came to stand right beside Harry, their arms brushing, not sparing a glance for anyone else.

Harry smiled up at him. “Still a way to go.”

“Don’t remind me,” Tom said, his nose scrunching up in a frown. “You got some water?”

Harry didn’t answer, only passed on the bottle he’d been handed by one of the fifth years. Tom gave him a grateful smile and drank, his right hand coming up to hold onto the back of Harry’s neck, his finger tracing the ridges of his upper spine, sending shivers across his skin.

“Thanks,” he said, licking the water off his top lip. Harry tracked the motion as he took the bottle back, swallowing heavily as he tore his eyes away.

“Okay Act III,” one of the stage directors said, “Claudius, Polonius, Gertrude, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, be ready, and…curtain open.”

Harry watched the beginning of the scene, heavily distracted by Tom pressed up against his back, his chin propped back onto his head.

“I have that godforsaken scene with Viola coming up soon,” Tom murmured, one of his hands going to Harry’s waist.

Harry tried not to jump, tried not to betray how fast his heart was beating. “You’ll be fine,” he whispered back, leaning into the chest behind him a bit—just because he could. He didn’t know how he’d manage to watch Tom sprawl all over someone else when they’d been acting like *this* all evening.

“*I hear him coming: let’s withdraw, my lord.*” Abraxas said before walking off the stage with Theo.

“That’s me,” Tom whispered in Harry’s ear before sauntering off onto the stage. “*To be or, not to be: that is the question [...]”*

Harry smiled as he watched him go effortlessly from Tom to Hamlet. He was starting to wonder if they were different people at all. It was just him and Viola on stage for this portion of the scene, and while Viola was very beautiful and played well, Harry couldn’t take his eyes off Tom.

He exited not long after while Abraxas and Theo reentered, though they didn’t get to speak a word to each other because Tom had to go back on for the second scene. The one in which Harry featured later on.

Harry could tell as he awaited his cue that Tom was getting tired. He had a lot of lines in Act III, lots of long and drawn out tirades and monologues. He bore it well though, and Harry was sure the audience wouldn’t notice the change.

As Gaspar and the boy playing Guildenstern exited the stage, leaving Tom alone, he called out, with renewed life in his voice, “*What ho! Horatio!*”

And Harry stepped onto the stage, into the spotlight. “*Here, sweet lord, at your service*.”

Tom’s eyes were dazzling in the golden spotlight, the gold in his them coming out as he strode towards Harry, reaching out to touch his arm. “*Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man / As e'er my conversation coped withal.*”

“*Oh, my dear lord—”* Harry replied, latching onto Tom’s wrist, feigning being flattered.

“*Nay, do not think I flatter;* [...]”

As Tom went on with his speech, his hands crawled up Harry’s arms until he held his face between them, and Harry’s fingers rested on the pulse points of his wrists.

"*Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice*
And could of men distinguish, her election
Hath seal'd thee for herself; for thou hast been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,
A man that fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks: and blest are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled,
That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee.—Something too much of this.—"

Tom spoke those words while looking straight into Harry's eyes, pressing upon every single one as if it were an apology for what was to come. As if to say *it's only you, there could only ever be you in my heart.* And Harry swayed in his hold until Tom's fingers went into his hair, holding him with a desperation they had not rehearsed, his fingers tender as they stroked down his neck.

"*Well, my lord:"* Harry replied once he'd finished the rest of his speech, trying to keep the breathlessness out of his voice, "*If he steal aught the whilst this play is playing, / and 'scape detecting, I will pay the theft.*"

Tom smiled at him, his fingers loosening in Harry's hair, his thumb stroking along his cheekbone as if to say, *I love you*. Harry almost thought he'd forgotten his line, but he seemed to merely be stalling as he let go of him with no little regret in his eyes and said, *"They are coming to the play; I must be idle: / Get you a place.*"

Harry nodded, trying not to stagger on his feet as Tom let go of him. He stood to the side as all the others entered, crowding the stage. Harry took a seat a few down from Viola, on the rows of seats that had been installed earlier by the younger students, while the others spoke their lines.

Tom staggered over to Viola, sprawling on the floor at her feet. "*Lady, shall I lie in your lap?*"

OPHELIA: *No, my lord.*

HAMLET: *I mean, my head upon your lap?*

OPHELIA: *Ay, my lord.*

HAMLET: *Do you think I meant country matters?*

OPHELIA: *I think nothing, my lord.*

HAMLET: *That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.*

OPHELIA: *What is, my lord?*

HAMLET: *Nothing*.

Harry's jaw clenched even before Tom dared put his hand on Viola's thigh, making her blush bright, even though she tried to maintain her indifference. He had to look away though when Tom turned and settled on the floor between her legs, his fingers playing idly with her hands as he faced the audience while they continued their dialogue.

They all watched the sixth years come onstage and act out the play they were meant to be watching in the smaller spotlight.

Even though he couldn't look at him directly, Harry admired how utterly *well* Tom played the part. The madness of the character shone through so well, but, better yet, the *fakeness* of it all was clear to everyone but the other characters. He was playing a character playing a character. It was impressive beyond belief and Harry could tell that the audience was captivated.

The scene played on and Harry stayed on the sidelines until everyone left but him and Tom.

They were silent for a second before Tom looked back at him, rolling his eyes as he dusted his clothes off. "*Why, let the stricken deer go weep*," he said, waving a dismissive arm in the direction of where the rest had disappeared to.

Harry smiled as Tom pronounced the rest of his lines, nodding along to what he was saying. He replied playfully to Hamlet's question, revelling in the way Tom stopped and walked back over towards him, leaving only a small space between them.

"*A whole one, I.*
For thou dost know, O Damon dear,
This realm dismantled was
Of Jove himself; and now reigns here
A very, very—pajock."

Harry smiled at the words, and said, "*You might have rhymed.*"

Tom smiled at him and laughed quietly. "*O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a / thousand pound. Didst perceive?*"

"*Very well, my lord*." Harry replied easily, leaning into Tom's hand that rested on his cheek.

"*Upon the talk of poisoning*?" he asked eagerly.

"*I did very well not him*," Harry said dutifully, grinning as Tom pulled away and clapped his hands together, the sound loud in the theatre.

"*Ah, ha! Come, some music! come, the recorders! / For if the king like not the comedy, / Why then, belike, he likes it not, perdy. / Come, some music!*" he exclaimed gleefully, going to take Harry's hands in his, before pulling them away abruptly as Gaspar and Guildenstern entered the stage.

Harry didn't have any more lines in the scene so he merely watched as Tom collected himself and engaged in the dialogue with the other two.

It took a while of silently watching, but Tom eventually said, "*Leave me, friends*" in that solemn and troubled way of his. Harry was the last to pass by him to exit the stage and he let his fingers ghost across Tom's. His hand followed briefly, stretching out as if to follow him, but he dropped it as Harry exited, and finished his speech alone.

Harry was there by the side of the stage when Tom exited, giving him a smile.

"How was it?" Tom asked, taking the bottle of water Harry handed to him.

"It was very good," he whispered back while Theo, Gaspar, and Guildenstern entered the stage, and Abraxas waited next to them for his cue, "very convincing."

Tom cocked an eyebrow in his direction, a playful smile on his face as he screwed the top back on the bottle. "Convincing? Did I convince you I liked her more than Horatio?"

Harry frowned faintly, unsure of what Tom meant. He nodded anyway and said, "Something like that."

Tom smiled, reaching up to hold onto the back of Harry's neck again, pulling him back until his back was pressed to his chest. "Must have been really convincing then."

Harry hummed, unsure of what they were talking about, too caught up in Tom's body pressed to his and the excitement radiating off of him. He'd never seen Tom during a production of which he was the star, and it was clear as day that he was beyond passionate about it. That this was where he belonged. He'd been nothing but bright grins and excessive affectionate physical contact with Harry since it had begun. And Harry felt privileged to witness it.

He didn't have any more scenes before the intermission but he stayed by the side of the stage, wanting to watch Tom and the others play. They were all on top of their game, he couldn't wait until Alphard and Rick got to get back onstage as well.

Tom entered the stage when it was his cue, squeezing the nape of Harry's neck as he went and taking the dagger he was handed. It was enchanting, watching him prowl behind a kneeling and praying Theo, swishing the dagger in the air as he pronounced his lines to the audience, debating whether to kill him or not.

He finished his speech and exited, Abraxas giving him a grin as he joined them. "Ready to kill me?" he asked as Theo arrived seconds later.

Tom gave him a playful smile. "Never been readier."

Harry smiled at the display, watching Abraxas and Margaux step out onto the stage together. Tom was quick to follow after calling out his line of "*Mother, mother, mother!*" from the sidelines.

It was one of Harry's favourite scenes in the whole play. Margaux had grown accustomed to how Tom acted during the scene but she still portrayed her fear very well. His anger was

scary to witness, his madness only adding to it. If Harry were in Margaux's place, he would've been terrified; faced with a furious and accusing Tom, madly swishing his sword around. He might have been a bit turned on, too, if he was being completely honest.

It was a tiring scene though, coupled with the fact that Tom had to drag Abraxas's corpse offstage afterwards. Once they were out of the spotlight the curtain closed to signal the end of Act III.

"You okay?" Harry asked as Tom helped Abraxas up.

"Hot," Tom replied, fanning his face. Harry thought, *yes you are*, but didn't think it was an appropriate thing to say.

"You're a bit red," he said instead, stepping up to him. "You were brilliant," he added with a bright grin to Abraxas, "you both were."

"Cheers, Harry," Abraxas said. "Right, that's it for me then."

"Lucky," Harry said. "Do you need anything?" he asked Tom.

"I need to cool down," he replied.

Harry nodded, pulling him over to the side and picking up an ice cold water bottle (the younger ones kept handing them to him). "Here," he said, sitting Tom down on one of the crates strewn around. He held the bottle to his face, his cheeks, and forehead.

He sighed in relief, his eyes fluttering shut. Harry smiled before looking around, flagging down the fifth year girl who had done his makeup.

"Towel and some more of whatever it is you put on our faces," he said to her as she rushed over.

"Harry we don't have time for that, the others are going back onstage," Tom said urgently, making to stand up.

"Shut up," Harry whispered, pushing him back down. "I'll keep an ear out, you just relax, you're exhausted. I'll make sure you don't miss your cue."

Tom didn't look happy about it, but he leant back into the coolness of the bottle. The girl reappeared seconds later, running over to them. She handed Harry the towel wordlessly as she uncapped the powdery thing.

Harry set the bottle down and wiped Tom's face of any lingering moisture from the water. He made sure he was properly dry before motioning for the girl to do her thing. She dabbed it on his face lightly, making sure to cover up his cheekbones that were still flushed.

"Okay you're all good," Harry said happily. "Thank you," he added to the girl who gave him a smile.

"*My soul is full of discord and dismay*" came Theo's voice from the stage.

“Okay that’s your cue, you have to go back on when they come off,” Harry said, taking Tom’s hands and pulling him back up.

Tom’s eyes roamed over his face quickly before he smiled, a genuine smile that felt a lot like gratitude. “Thank you,” he whispered, reaching up to hold Harry’s face in his hands before pressing a kiss to his hair and walking off onto the stage.

Harry staggered back, blinking dazedly.

“You okay, Harry?” Theo asked, coming up to him.

Harry blinked up at him, shaking himself. “Fine,” he said quickly. “Fine, how are you doing? You must be tired.”

“Alright,” Theo said with a smile. “Can’t wait for intermission though, we’ll go have a smoke, yeah?”

“I’m not getting high during intermission,” Harry said with a laugh.

“Just a fag,” Theo said, grinning at him, “promise. Get Tom to come too, he’ll need the fresh air.”

Harry nodded as Theo went back to wait for his cue to reenter the stage.

He watched them all play the last two scenes in which Tom didn’t get more than thirty seconds offstage. When he finally exited after his last monologue, one of the sixth years stepped onto the stage and announced the intermission before the curtain was drawn and movement could be heard in the main room.

Harry collected a tired looking Tom and pulled him over to where Theo and the others were pushing through people to get to the side door of the theatre.

“We’re going for a smoke,” Harry told him, avoiding other people standing about by pressing up against him.

“Brilliant,” Tom said, his hand coming up to Harry’s lower back and guiding him up to the door. They passed through and took the hallway leading up to the ground floor, meeting Theo and the others outside in a shadowed area of the castle, the night sky shining above them. Thankfully, they didn’t see anyone else.

“How are you holding up, Tom?” Theo asked, his cigarette already lit in his mouth.

“Alright,” Tom replied, taking two cigarettes out of the pack Rick was holding out to him and handing one to Harry. “I’m glad to be done with Act III.”

“You haven’t missed a single line yet,” Alphard said.

“Hopefully I don’t forget any at all.”

“When you forget lines it’s in Act III,” Harry said, lighting his cigarette, “I doubt you’d forget any now, especially with the intermission giving you a break.”

“I don’t know how you do it,” Rick said, exhaling smoke up towards the starry sky.

“I’m just better,” Tom replied arrogantly, though he was smirking playfully. He was arrogant but it was an earned arrogance, because, realistically, who else of them could do what he did?

“You are,” Theo said with a smile, “but you wouldn’t be nearly as good if we weren’t as good as we are.”

“I never said that I would be,” Tom answered, his eyes flicking to Harry.

“So you admit we’re good?” Gaspar asked with a snicker.

Tom sighed. “You’re okay,” he admitted begrudgingly.

Theo whooped in the air while the others clapped each other on the back. Harry laughed as he watched the display.

“I told you,” Tom said, turning to him with an eye roll, though he looked awfully fond, “they’re falling over each other for a compliment from me.”

“I didn’t realise they came in such rare supply,” Harry said with a grin, sucking on his teeth as he inhaled the smoke, “and held so much value.”

“I may have been a bit liberal in giving them away to you,” Tom said, a twinkle in his eye.

Harry snorted. “You’ve complimented me like, twice, at most. I wouldn’t call that liberal.”

“For me it is,” Tom replied, sucking down the end of his cigarette and blowing the smoke in Harry’s face, surprising him into a laugh.

“What’s up with you two tonight? You’ve been flirting like there’s no tomorrow, I even heard some fifth years talking about it,” Theo said, raising an eyebrow in their direction.

“We’re not flirting,” Harry huffed, whacking Theo’s stomach hard enough to wind him. “We’re literally just having a conversation.”

Theo groaned, gripping Harry’s shoulder hard enough to hurt. “I’m gonna kill you one day Potter if you keep doing that.”

Harry laughed, propping his cigarette between his lips and bending down fast enough to grab Theo behind his knees and haul him over his shoulder.

Theo went with a shriek, falling back onto Harry’s back, his waist folding against his shoulder.

“What was that, Nott?” Harry teased, gripping his legs in one hand, taking the cigarette out of his mouth with the other. “What shall I do? Drop you in the lake? In the mud? Ruin your

costume?"

"Harry *no*!" Theo shrieked, his hands grappling at Harry's back, squirming in his hold. "Please, please don't do that."

Harry laughed, the others were positively gleeful, laughing at Theo's predicament. "Then you'll promise to *stop* going on about me and Tom, there's nothing going on. Because right now I could body slam you into the ground so hard you wouldn't get back up, I've done it before, so fair warning."

"Oh *please* do it," Tom said, and Harry turned to see him smirking as he watched the stupid display.

"No no no!" Theo exclaimed, his hands fisted in Harry's clothes. "I promise! I promise I'll shut up, I won't mention flirting or snogging or shagging or anything! Please put me down!"

Harry laughed again, bending back down to set Theo on his feet. He straightened out and tapped his cheek condescendingly and said, "Good boy."

Theo slapped his hand away, glaring at him. "Never have I been so humiliated," he huffed, though there was definitely a smile pulling at his lips.

"That was kind of sexy," Alphard commented, everyone's head whipping towards him before they burst out laughing. "What? Wasn't it?"

"You know what? It really was," Theo said grudgingly. He slinked up to Harry's side, feeling his biceps suggestively. "I like strong men who can pick me up," he leered.

Tom flicked his forehead, the sound resounding around them. "Piss off," he said, rolling his eyes.

"You're mental, all of you," Harry stated, laughing as he put the cigarette out and dropped it in a bin. "Come on, we need to go back."

"Yes, it would be a bit bad if we didn't go back," Gaspar said.

"'*A bit bad'*?" Theo repeated disbelievingly.

"D'you think you could pick me up like that, Harry?" Rick asked curiously. "It was very effortless with Theo and he's a lot taller than you."

Harry grinned as he slipped back through the side door. "I could put every single one of you to the floor." He saw Tom raise an eyebrow but he didn't say anything while the others went *oooh*.

They got back to the theatre in plenty of time, the audience still taking their seats again.

"Back on in five," one of the sixth years announced to them as they took their place by the stage.

“Are you ready?” Tom asked, planting his hands on Harry’s shoulders and squeezing, sending a jolt down his spine. “You still have most of your dialogue to do.”

Harry twisted in his hold to look up at him, smiling. “‘Course I’m ready, I’ve been waiting all night back here.”

Tom smiled, rocking Harry back until he hit his chest and he could prop his chin on his head, holding him there with a forearm across his chest. “Switch places for a bit, I get the rest of Act IV off.”

Harry hummed, reaching up to hold onto Tom’s forearm—which really was unfairly large. Maybe this sudden physical contact was a bit strange, but something that Harry had learned during his years on the rugby team was that some boys were very physically affectionate in a friendly manner. Though that didn’t really fit the image he had of Tom, it could still excuse his behaviour.

“You ready, Harry? It’s us,” Margaux said as she popped up beside them, her hands bunched up in her skirts.

“Yep,” Harry said, extricating himself from Tom’s arm. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Good luck,” Tom replied, giving him a smile.

Scene five passed easily, Harry really didn’t have much to say throughout it. He spent more time going back and forth between exiting and entering the stage.

Scene six was another story for him though, he had to read Hamlet’s letter to Horatio. It was written down on the paper prop, that Tom had written himself in his elegant handwriting, even though Harry knew it by heart.

“*[...] He that thou knowest thine, HAMLET.*” Harry finished reading to the audience, his excitement and surprise palpable as he turned to the other boys. “*Come, I will make you way for these your letters; / And do't the speedier, that you may direct me / To him from whom you brought them.”*

He exited after that, his track record of remembering lines still perfect and his acting on point. He joined Tom by the sidelines in watching Theo and Alphard enter the stage. It was a long scene, one neither of them were in, so when Tom didn’t make a move to pull Harry into him, Harry took it upon himself to shuffle back until his back was pressed to Tom’s chest and his head was supporting his chin.

Tom only chuckled lightly, the sound rumbling against Harry’s ribcage and echoing throughout his chest, and settled his arms around Harry’s shoulders, locking him in. They watched the scene pan out like that, their friends playing in front of them bathed in the bright spotlight while they were huddled in the shadows.

Harry was claustrophobic, it was a fact. He couldn’t be held in tight spaces, couldn’t be locked in small rooms, or he’d have a panic attack. It was an automatic response from the

stress of having to live in the cupboard under the stairs during his time at the Dursleys. He'd never told anyone about it, people just accepted that he was claustrophobic.

It would only be natural that he wouldn't like to be restrained or held too tight by someone much bigger than him. But that wasn't the case. If Harry felt safe, and like he could get away if needed, he enjoyed having someone stronger and larger hold him down or hold him tight. He enjoyed the feeling of having something heavy against his chest, it felt grounding.

That's what Sirius's hugs felt like, it's how he used to feel when his dad would pick him up and squeeze him against his chest.

So, having Tom's arms wrapped very firmly around his torso just felt *nice*, and Harry's breathing evened out as they watched the stage together, the back of his head falling back to rest against his shoulder.

The curtain drew again, signalling the end of Act IV, and Alphard and Theo appeared backstage. Harry blinked dazedly, his fingers twitching against Tom's forearms where he was holding on. He felt like he'd just had a nap.

"You alright, Harry?" Theo said with a laugh as he came over. "You look like you were asleep, were we that boring?"

Tom's arms tightened around him minutely as Harry straightened up a bit. "God it'll be us soon," he said. "And no I wasn't sleeping, you were very good."

Theo grinned, striking up a conversation with Abraxas who was next to them while Harry went back to slumping against Tom, feeling his eyes start to itch.

"The clowns are going on," Tom murmured into his hair.

"Be us soon then," Harry mumbled back, turning his head and yawning into Tom's arm that was right next to his ear.

"Tired?" Tom teased. "We need you at your best for the last Act."

Harry sighed and removed Tom's arms from him gently. "I need to get off you then 'cause it's putting me to sleep."

"That easy to get you to shut up, is it?"

Harry pinched him. "Piss off," he muttered while grinning. A sudden lethargy had taken hold of him and he desperately needed to shake it off. He stretched, the muscles in his shoulders popping.

"Ready to go?" Tom asked, smoothing down Harry's costume down his back, shoulders, and chest.

"Yeah, my eyes are fucking itchy I can't wait to get my contacts out."

"*Mass I cannot tell*."

“Shit that’s us,” Tom said, dragging Harry over to the edge of the stage, stopping to take a quick breath and flash him a smile before walking out. Harry had no choice but to follow, the panic of almost missing their cue having woken him up a bit, though it was a very strange experience to suddenly be in the spotlight in front of hundreds of people.

“*Has this fellow no feeling of his business, / that he sings at grave-making?*” Tom asked once they’d gotten their wits about them while listening to the first clown speak amongst the dark green lighting of the stage.

“*Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness*.” Harry replied, sinking easily into the Hamlet and Horatio dynamic, not so different from that of Harry and Tom’s.

They went on with the scene, their lines rolling off their tongues naturally as they conversed side by side. There was no prominent physical contact in this part of the scene and it let the audience see another side of their relationship; not the private desperation, but the casual way in which they spoke and listened to one another, understanding each other on a deep level.

When Alphard and the others started to emerge from the sidelines, Tom gripped Harry’s arm and watched them with wide eyes. “*The queen, the courtiers: who is this they follow? / And with such maimed rites? This doth betoken / The corse they follow did with desperate hand / Fordo its own life: 'twas of some estate. / Couch we awhile, and mark.*” he spoke, before dragging Harry down out of the spotlight, crouching in the shadows as they watched, his hand resting on Harry’s shoulder.

Harry followed once they got to the part in the scene where Tom leapt up and confronted the others, making to stop him as he jumped into the grave and scuffled with Alphard. Their blocking was perfect and Harry only intervened when he recognised it was time, by wrapping his arms around Tom’s waist and hauling him back. “*Good my lord, be quiet*,” he said as Tom settled down, glaring at Alphard, his chest heaving.

Tom exited soon after, and Harry followed when Theo said, *“I pray you, good Horatio, wait upon him*.”

“Last scene!” Tom said excitedly as Harry got to his level. There was a renewed light in his eyes, and Harry knew that Tom adored the last scene, had qualified it as ‘the culmination of the whole story’ many times, but he was sure there was some happiness for it all to be almost over too. They were all exhausted.

They weren’t allowed much reprieve as they had to reenter the stage only two minutes later, after the stage directors had cleared the stage and set the lighting properly.

This was another beginning of a scene where they merely spoke, Harry doing more listening than speaking, as was his habit. It was different though, an air of anticipation in the air as Hamlet erred between speaking serious words with a frown and maddening words which verged on delirium, his eyes lighting up with his madness.

“*It will be short: the interim is mine; / And a man's life's no more than to say 'One.'”* Tom spoke, waving his hands in the air as he convinced himself of his own words. He turned back to Harry though, his eyes softening as he took his face in his hands and spoke gently, *“But I*

am very sorry, good Horatio, / That to Laertes I forgot myself; / For, by the image of my cause, I see / The portraiture of his: I'll court his favours. / But, sure, the bravery of his grief did put me / Into a towering passion."

Harry sighed, going to speak more to Hamlet, but cut himself off, turning curious eyes to the side stage and extricating himself from Tom's hands. "*Peace! who comes here?"*

The boy playing Osric emerged in his frankly ridiculous costume, and they began their back and forth; with Tom openly mocking him while Harry was quiet in his mockery, though Horatio shared Hamlet's through teasing smirks and significant looks.

They started talk of a duel between Hamlet and Laertes, and Harry watched the scene play out, speaking his lines when necessary though he retained Horatio's pensive frown of confusion.

Osric left and gave way to another Lord played by a sixth year.

"*You will lose this wager, my lord*." Harry stated as the Lord left, leaving them alone on the stage once again. He stared up at Tom with wide eyes, trying to hold back his desperation when he only saw gleeful madness reflecting in his eyes.

"*I do not think so: since he went into France, / I have been in continual practise: I shall win at the / odds. But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here / about my heart: but it is no matter.*" Tom replied, brushing him off.

"*Nay, good my lord –"*

But Hamlet interrupted him. "*It is but foolery; but it is such a kind of / gain-giving, as would perhaps trouble a woman.*"

Harry bit his lip before making a grab for Tom's lapel, holding the fabric tight as he forced Tom to look at him, his eyes pleading and he spoke the words between them. "*If your mind dislike any thing, obey it: I will / forestall their repair hither, and say you are not / fit.*" he begged, and it was one of the more intimate moments between them, in which Tom stared back at him, his eyes flicking between Harry's, as if hesitant.

But he ultimately pulled back, letting his own resolve strengthen as he looked away, unable to look at Horatio lest he change his mind. "*Not a whit, we defy augury: there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. [...]"*

Harry sighed, letting his hands drop to his sides, straightening up as Theo, Margaux, Alphard, and a few other minor characters entered the stage.

He watched as the scene slowly descended into chaos. The sparring between Tom and Alphard was perfect, neither of them missing any of the blocks, remembering all of Harry's feedback on how to angle their bodies to give the audience a better view, make it more believable.

It all got hectic as Theo exclaimed, *"It is the poison'd cup: it is too late.*" to the audience.

Harry watched, his eyes flitting between all of them as chaos ensued, Laertes catching Hamlet with his sword and then Hamlet harming him with his own sword, effectively poisoning them both.

"*They bleed on both sides. How is it, my lord?*" Harry asked, making to move towards Tom but stopping himself.

He watched as the Queen died and Alphard revealed the treason, spurring Tom into stabbing Theo who died after he said, "*Follow my mother*."

Laertes was next to die, after exchanging forgiveness with Hamlet.

Tom fell and Harry was by his side in his instant, his heart beating erratically in his chest. The room was filled with tension and he let it wash over him.

"*Heaven make thee free of it! I follow thee.*
I am dead, Horatio. Wretched queen, adieu!
You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, death,
Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you—
But let it be. Horatio, I am dead;
Thou livest; report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied."

Harry's hands roamed all over Tom's chest as he spoke his words, his breathing coming short. He grasped Tom's face in his hands, forcing their eyes to lock. "*Never believe it:"* he said, voice coming out frail and desperate, like he himself was dying, "*I am more an antique Roman than a Dane: / Here's yet some liquor left.*"

He made to let go and grab the wine for himself, but Tom grabbed his wrists, reaching out to hold him closer still, until their foreheads touched and his eyes fluttered shut. He held the cup with one hand, their fingers touching as they held it together. He spoke, quietly, but loud in the silent theatre:

"*As thou'rt a man,*
Give me the cup: let go; by heaven, I'll have't.
O good Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story."

He held on, pressing his words into Harry as hard as he was holding onto his neck, though his fingers were soft where they trailed into his hair and stroked gently. Harry's tears came, as they always did, and they fell hot and heavy onto his cheeks as he managed a couple sobs, his hands roaming desperately over Tom's forearms and face.

A noise sounded in the distance and Tom took a breath and said, "*What warlike noise is this?*"

Osric replied: "*Young Fortinbras, with conquest come from Poland, / To the ambassadors of England gives / This warlike volley.*"

Tom sighed, his hands tightening on Harry's cheeks, his eyes opened, boring into Harry's despite the blur of tears obscuring his vision. Tom's lips parted, his eyes widening as his nose bumped into Harry's. His breath hitched but he didn't say anything.

Harry scanned his face quickly, the silence stretching on for longer than usual. Tom's eyes dropped to his lips and so Harry mouthed, *"O, I die—*"

Tom's lips quirked up in a small smile that he bit off quickly before he spoke:

"*O, I die, Horatio;*
The potent poison quite o'er-crows my spirit:
I cannot live to hear the news from England;
But I do prophesy the election lights
On Fortinbras: he has my dying voice;
So tell him, with the occurrents, more and less,
Which have solicited. The rest is silence."

His eyes ran over Harry quickly before his eyes fluttered shut and his head dropped back onto the floor, his fingers trailing down Harry's face as they went lax.

Harry's breath hitched, his sob very loud in the silence, only interrupted by sniffling in the audience. He sobbed again as he let his fingers trail along Tom's jaw.

"*Now cracks a noble heart.*" His voice cracked as he said it, his hands feeling the warmth of Tom's body. "*Good night sweet prince:"* he leant down and pressed a soft, lingering, kiss to his cheek, "*And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!*" He sniffed, squeezing Tom's fingers in his hand before laying his hands to rest on his chest.

He stood up on shaky legs, facing the audience with tear-streaked cheeks. "*Why does the drum come hither*?" he asked, wiping at his cheeks furiously though the tears just kept coming, undoubtedly spurred on by how irritated his eyes were.

"*Where is this sight*?" Rick said as he entered as Prince Fortinbras.

"*What is it ye would see? / If aught of woe or wonder, cease your search.*" Harry replied, an air of despair to him that felt very decadent in the theatre.

The ambassador announced Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths and Harry threw up his hands, as if he weren't even surprised by the announcement of more death.

"*Not from his mouth,*
Had it the ability of life to thank you:
He never gave commandment for their death.

But since, so jump upon this bloody question,
You from the Polack wars, and you from England,
Are here arrived give order that these bodies
High on a stage be placed to the view;
And let me speak to the yet unknowing world
How these things came about: so shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' reads: all this can I
Truly deliver."

He spoke the words with despair laced into them, fury, and anger, and *heartbreak*. His voice was cracked, his cheeks wet, and his heart broken, for everyone to see. He stood alone in a massacre.

Rick stepped forward. *"Let us haste to hear it, / And call the noblest to the audience. / For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune: / I have some rights of memory in this kingdom, / Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me.*"

Harry took a breath, wiping at his cheeks again as his shoulders sagged. "*Of that I shall have also cause to speak, / And from his mouth whose voice will draw on more; / But let this same be presently perform'd, / Even while men's minds are wild; lest more mischance / On plots and errors, happen.*"

Rick nodded, walking amongst the dead bodies though he didn't step close to Hamlet's, his eyes flickering between Tom and Harry standing next to him.

"*Let four captains*
Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage;
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royally: and, for his passage,
The soldiers' music and the rites of war
Speak loudly for him.
Take up the bodies: such a sight as this
Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.
Go, bid the soldiers shoot."

And with those last words of the play, Rick went and hauled Tom onto his shoulders as if he weighed nothing, Harry went to Alphard and picked him up bridal style, which was easy considering how little he weighed, while others grabbed the rest. They all marched off, Harry and Rick last as they looked at each other, looked out at the audience, and finally exited the stage, for the last time.

The peal of ordnance is shot, the curtain closes.

It was silent for a second backstage as everyone stood up correctly, dusting their clothes off, before they caught each other's eyes and identical grins split across their faces. Harry was

engulfed in a hug by both Theo and Rick, while Alphard jumped up onto his back in silent celebration.

“You were *incredible*!” Rick said above the applause sounding in the audience.

Harry smiled, managing to extricate himself and get to Tom’s side. “Thanks but I think we should be congratulating Tom, who forgot *zero* lines throughout the whole play!”

They all clapped happily and raucously, slapping Tom’s shoulder in congratulations. Tom’s smile found Harry though, pulling him in quickly for a sideways hug.

“Alright, curtain up in twenty seconds everyone!”

Tom pulled a girl over amidst the celebrations and said, “Get Harry’s glasses,” to which she nodded and ran off.

He turned Harry in his hold and leant down with a grin. “Take these out then,” he said. “I’m not sure you can see anything.”

Harry giggled, somewhat pathetically, but so *happy* he didn’t really mind, and quickly managed to take his contacts out, relying on Tom to not trip or anything as they moved to the side. The girl got back and handed his glasses over which Tom took and slipped onto his nose for him.

“Thank you,” Harry said with a smile, rubbing at his eyes from under his glasses, trying to chase the blur away.

“You were incredible,” Tom whispered, tilting Harry’s chin up. He leant down, his lips a breath away from his ear as he murmured, “And thank you, for my line.”

Harry grinned up at him, tapping his chest gently with the tips of his fingers. “No problem,” he whispered back, grinning as Tom whisked him under his arm to pull him back onstage.

The curtain lifted when they were all lined up and the theatre erupted into applause. Harry could see their teachers clapping happily, standing up in the front row, surrounded by a load of people he didn’t know. Some of them had red rimmed eyes, others were watching them with calculating gazes.

He looked further and immediately spotted Remus, Ron, and Hermione who were hollering louder than anyone in the room, Remus whistling obnoxiously. Harry grinned and waved at them, looking up as Tom squeezed him into his side. They shared a smile and Harry rested his head down onto his shoulder, utterly delighted by the whole evening.

Theo came over and grabbed Harry by the scruff of his neck, forcing him into a bow which forced Tom to follow, making a lot of the audience laugh. Harry didn’t even try to fight it, accepting that they were doing the bow when Theo joined him on his other side.

They were all grinning, a sort of magical high running through the air that only came after a good performance. And it was the most intoxicating thing Harry had ever felt—made worse by Tom’s continuous presence and unlimited smiles being sent his way.

— Scene twelve —

Once they'd finished receiving applause from the audience, they all went to get changed in the dressing rooms. It was as if their exhaustion had melted off them, leaving behind only the ecstatic high of the adrenaline rush.

They entered the Great Hall to much cheering, everyone that had been in the theatre already assembled there for the post-production party, except the younger years who had been sent to bed.

Hermione flung herself into Harry's arms as soon as she spotted him, her grin blinding. "You were amazing!" she exclaimed, pulling back to look at him properly. "You were absolutely incredible, I was in shock!"

"Thank you," Harry said, feeling shy.

She turned to Tom who was standing next to him and gave him the same grin. "You too, oh my god, I can't believe you recited every line perfectly! I was following with my copy of *Hamlet*, you were incredible!"

Tom dipped his head in thanks, a smile pulling at his lips. "Thank you, that's very kind," he said, overly diplomatic but very obviously pleased with the praise.

"The chemistry!" she gushed further, looking between them. "God, I hadn't even picked up on the romantic undertones in the text, I'm gonna have to read it again with your rendition in mind, it brought so much life and nuance to the characters!"

"Alright 'mione," Ron said with a grin, settling a hand on her shoulder. "She's been having a nerdy freak out ever since the end of the show," he explained, looking fond as his eyes drifted to her. "You were brilliant, mate. I didn't understand much of what was going on, but I know you were great and I'm sure 'mione will explain everything to me."

"Cheers," Harry said brightly, accepting the accolade Ron initiated.

Remus came over, managing to manoeuvre through the dense crowd. His eyes were bright, genuine pride shining through, and Harry was quick to fall into his arms in a bone crushing hug.

"I'm literally speechless, Bambi," Remus said, looking down at him. "That was an out of this world performance, you were all so good, better even than a lot of actors I've seen on sets and stuff. It was astounding, truly. That last scene? Fucking hell I was bawling my eyes out with you!"

Harry laughed, his jaw aching for how much he was grinning. "Thanks Moony."

"I'm going to go see Dumbledore," Tom said, his hand at Harry's back.

“I’ll come,” Harry replied, wanting to know what their Professors thought of the performance.

Remus scruffed up his hair, smiling down at him before letting him go. Harry was immediately whisked under Tom’s arm as he guided him to the part of the room where their Professors were gathered, watching over the drinks table.

“Well then?” Tom said as they rocked up before them. Harry could hear the smirk in his voice.

Dumbledore smiled, his eyes twinkling. “Phenomenal,” was all he said.

McGonagall glared at them, though her eyes remained soft. She reached out and smacked Harry gently. “You awful boy,” she said while Harry shrank back into Tom, “making an old woman cry.”

Harry grinned at her, feeling his cheeks flush red. “What did you think, Professor?” he asked boldly, turning to Snape.

The man looked at them with his beady eyes, something like approval in them. “It was—” he paused, clearing his throat— “good.”

Tom chuckled, his eyebrows raised. “So it was the best thing you’ve ever seen?” he said cheekily, though it wasn’t a far off assumption.

“Do not get cocky, Mr. Riddle,” Snape said, a reluctant smile pulling at his mouth. “But it was very good, I do not regret our decision of giving you *Hamlet*.”

“You did an incredible job, boys. We could not be happier with your performance tonight,” Dumbledore said with a smile. “There are many people here already who wish to speak to you.”

“Yes, get a drink boys,” McGonagall said, “and then get to socialising.”

They did as instructed, though it felt very bizarre to be getting himself a glass of whiskey under the noses of his Professors. They set off into the crowd then, and no sooner had they walked ten steps that Tom was being beckoned away. They shared one last smile before being pulled in different directions, Harry watching as Tom got to talking with someone very official looking.

“Harry, is it?”

Harry turned at the tap on his shoulder, wrenching his eyes away from Tom. “Hi, yeah, that’s me,” he said, finding himself face to face with Theo and Rick’s mothers.

“You know, Harry, when we found out there was a new student this year I’m not going to lie to you, we were a bit pissed,” Rick’s mum said as if she were confiding a secret. Harry laughed, only vaguely uncomfortable. “But your performance was incredible, you deserved to be on that stage as much as any of our boys.”

“I have my agent here,” Mrs. Nott said with a kind smile, “if you’d like to have a word. She’s looking for young talent, says we’re getting too old.”

Harry laughed lightly, his eyes wide as he nodded. “I’d love to, yes, thank you, that’s very kind. And you’re really not old, you don’t look a day over twenty five,” he said with a charming smile.

“Oh!” Mrs. Nott exclaimed, a faint smattering of pink coating her cheeks. “Theo said you were lovely, he really wasn’t wrong! Come with me then, Harry, I’ll introduce you.”

The night wore on and Harry ended up with a pocket full of business cards, a couple personal phone numbers, and so many compliments he didn’t know what to do with them.

“Hi, Harry,” Chris Lestrange greeted as he managed to get to him.

“Hi Chris, did you like the play?” Harry asked, his tongue loosened by the copious amounts of whiskey he’d knocked back.

“Yeah, it was brilliant, even though I didn’t really understand what was going on,” Chris said with a self-conscious laugh. “You were very impressive though, as you all were.”

“Thank you,” Harry said with a smile, still not really believing he was speaking to him.

“Listen, I’m off with my parents now, but I wanted to give you that autograph you wanted,” he said with a grin, handing over a piece of paper that read: *Harry, well done with the play, you were my favourite on stage (don’t tell my brother)! I’ll add you to the VIP list of people who can come to any of my games for free, here’s my number if you need anything. Chris xx*

Harry’s heart stopped, his cheeks flooding with colour so violently he got a bit of a head rush. “You don’t—you don’t need to do that, Chris. God, any game?” he said, utterly disbelieving.

Chris grinned. “Any game,” he confirmed, nodding. “Listen, Harry, I’m gonna be honest,” he leant a bit closer, a sheepish smile on his face, “I know there’s something going on with that Tom, but if you’re ever interested, give us a ring and I’ll buy you a drink, okay?”

Harry, honest to God, almost passed out. He looked up at Chris with wide eyes.

“*But*,” Chris went on, “whether you take me up on that or not, you’ll still be on the VIP list, okay? I’d be happy to just be mates.”

“Okay,” Harry managed to breathe out. “Okay, thank you—I’m *flattered*, really, thank you.”

Chris smiled at him. “I know you’ll be all caught up in school until July, but I’ll see you for your end of year production, and then we’ll get you down to the pitch to see our match in August, how about that?”

“Yeah, yes, brilliant,” Harry said, clutching the note rather hard in his hand.

Chris’s smile didn’t waver as he squeezed Harry’s shoulder. “I’ll see you around then, Harry, have a nice Christmas.”

“Yes, you too,” Harry stuttered out, “and thank you again.”

Chris grinned and went to join his parents who were standing by the doors. Harry watched him go, his heart in his throat and his cheeks burning.

He stood there for a few seconds, trying to process what had just happened. He looked up, trying to get his bearings, and his eyes landed on Tom, their eyes locking from across the room. And suddenly the prospect of having Christopher Lestrange’s personal number in his hand didn’t seem that groundbreaking.

Tom didn’t smile, he merely stared at Harry for a few seconds before turning back to his conversation with an older woman that Harry didn’t recognise.

“Harry, we’re gonna head off—oh no, what’s wrong?” It was Hermione, appearing in front of him with flushed cheeks.

“What? Nothing’s wrong,” Harry said quickly, turning his attention to her.

She passed a calculating gaze over him before grasping his hand in hers and tugging him over to a quieter corner of the room. “Did Christopher just give you his number?”

“How the fuck did you guess that?” Harry asked, disbelieving.

Hermione smiled, rolling her eyes. “Well, you’re still holding the note, so I just wondered what would have you in such a state.”

Harry took a breath, his eyes flitting around the room. “I just—yeah, and he said I could go to any of his games for free and that if I was interested, he’d like to buy me a drink sometime.”

Hermione gasped, her eyes going comically wide. “Oh my god, what did you say?”

Harry swallowed. “Nothing really—he seemed to think I’d say no so he wasn’t even asking, just putting it out there and—”

“And you don’t want to,” Hermione said, her eyes searching him.

“I—no,” Harry said flatly, his eyes dropping to the piece of paper in his hand. Seeing it didn’t make his heart beat faster, now that the surprise of it all had passed.

“Look, Harry,” she said gently, her hand coming to rest on Harry’s arm, “I know you struggle with this sort of stuff, but—do you like him? I mean, I was talking to Theo earlier and apparently you were *cuddling* backstage, and your performance certainly felt very real.”

“We weren’t *cuddling*,” Harry denied, his cheeks flushing, his chest feeling warm at the reminder.

“But you like him.”

“No I don’t, we aren’t even *friends* ‘mione,” he said, a certain amount of vulnerability leaking into his tone making his denial sound pathetic.

“Harry, I can see that this is troubling you. You can talk to me, you know you can,” she said softly, her eyes open and inviting in a way that Harry could never resist. She’d been the first person he’d told of the Dursleys' abuse.

“I do,” he whispered in a rush, “I fancy him so much, ‘mione, I really really do and I don’t understand because we’re not even *friends*.”

“Oh Harry,” she said, looking at him with nothing but affection. “Look, I know you won’t believe me but I’m pretty sure—and so is Theo—that the feeling’s mutual—” Harry shook his head but she squeezed his arm in reprimand— “and even if it’s not, I’m sure it *could* be. You say you’re not friends but then what are you? I’m sorry but you’re definitely friends, at the least.”

“But he said we never would be,” Harry whispered, the note from Chris forgotten in his hand. “He was very clear—*we will never be friends*, that’s what he said.”

“Things *change*, Harry,” Hermione said urgently. “Things change and I know you struggle with change and you don’t let things evolve naturally, you stick to first impressions. But just —try and be friends. I can see that you really like him, I can see it in your eyes.”

Harry laughed lightly. “What does that even mean?” he said quietly, leaning forward until his forehead was pressed to her shoulder.

“It means that you’ve never liked anyone how you like him,” she replied matter-of-factly, her gaze too intense, too *knowing*, and Harry wanted to shy away from it.

“Yeah,” he admitted after a stretch of silence. “I do.”

Hermione, Ron, and Remus left not long after, bidding Harry happy holidays. They were staying in the village for another night but setting off early in the morning. In the meantime, all the guests had left the party, leaving only the older students behind. The Professors had retired to their rooms, leaving them to their own devices.

Harry was exhausted, wanting nothing more than to go to bed. He was going to sneak off, Irish exit style, but caught sight of Tom by the door, standing alone.

“Are you planning an Irish Exit too?” Harry asked as he got to his level.

Tom turned to him, chucking lightly. “I was, actually.”

“Shall we go back then?” Harry proposed, already halfway out of the door.

“Fancy a smoke down by the lake?” Tom asked, a quick smile gracing his features. “I pickpocketed Theo earlier and got everything we need.”

Harry grinned, surprised. “I’ll go nick a bottle of something then. Be back in a second.”

As tired as he was, a smoke by the lake with only Tom for company under the starry sky sounded divine. He was quick to get to the drinks table where he stole a bottle of whiskey,

and even quicker to get back to the doors, managing to avoid anyone who would have been susceptible to speak to him.

“Come on then,” Tom said with a smile, opening the door for him. They slipped out of the Great Hall and meandered through the Entrance Hall until they reached the cold air outside.

“Fresh air,” Harry said with a sigh, letting the cold cool down his burning skin.

“Beach or bridge?” Tom asked as they walked across the grass to the lake. They could see the chapel not far away, the windows dark.

“Bridge I’d say,” Harry replied, looking up at the moon. “I had sand sticking to me for a week after Halloween.”

Tom smiled, his nose scrunching up. “Me too,” he said. They’d never spoken of Halloween, of how Tom had carried Harry back to the shore, both of them dripping wet and shirtless, or of how Tom had held Harry’s thighs in his hands.

They got to the bridge’s level and climbed up to the centre before sitting down, exactly where Harry had crouched down to stay out of sight during *Macbeth*. It was very dark, the water below menacing, but the starry night and full moon were bright. It was almost eerily silent, the smallest sound feeling unbearably loud after the chaos of the Great Hall. Harry listened to his own breathing for a minute, basking in the quiet as he looked up at the stars, before inevitably glancing over at Tom. He looked devastating in the moonlight.

“What did you get?” Tom asked, taking the bottle Harry had set down and inspecting it. “And I thought I wouldn’t have a hangover tomorrow. It would seem I was wrong.”

Harry laughed, pressing his back against the barrier so he and Tom were sitting across from each other. “We’re on holiday, and we have much to celebrate. We’re allowed to get hammered.”

Tom smiled, shaking his head as he uncapped the bottle and took a quick drink before handing it to Harry. “Whatever happens, I’m not going in the lake, so don’t even try that with me again.”

Okay, so they were alluding to Halloween.

Harry took a quick breath before taking a drink to mask it. “We’ll see,” was all he said with a cheeky grin, though he had no intention of going in the lake either. “Do you want me to roll then?”

“No, I’ll do it,” Tom replied, taking everything out of his pockets.

Harry cocked an eyebrow, surprised to see him offering. “You just want first light, don’t you?”

“Well, apparently one must roll to acquire the first light, so that is what I am doing.”

Harry laughed, shaking his head. “Did you get any deals then?” he asked as he watched Tom roll the joint, incapable of taking his eyes off him, transfixed by the way his long fingers rolled the paper together.

He nodded. “Loads, and you?”

Harry rifled through his pockets, dropping the various cards onto the wooden surface of the bridge. “Four business cards and five personal numbers. Some of the agents said they’d be coming back at the end of the year too, to see what we did for that production.”

“Me too, I think I got five business cards, quite a few personal numbers, and I actually had one agent offer to send a contract to the school at the beginning of the year. I said I’d rather wait until I’d finished school before signing any contracts,” Tom said, stopping to lick the paper, Harry tracking the motion religiously. “I had a very strange conversation with a man who believed we’d misunderstood the text.”

“I saw him!” Harry exclaimed, laughing. “Yeah he told me we’d got it all wrong and that our characterizations were completely off, I think he had a go at Dumbledore too, asking him how he could allow something like this to happen.”

Tom rolled his eyes, packing the joint. “I told him that we were at liberty to interpret the characters as we wished, and then I walked away.”

Harry grinned. “I told him that we’d initially planned to snog onstage but that we decided not to because we didn’t want to take away from the main storyline.”

Tom snorted, propping the joint between his lips. “Did you actually?”

Harry laughed. “Yeah, you should’ve seen his face. He was dead silent so I gave more details, saying we’d planned a thirty second snogging scene with our hands down each other’s trousers. He walked away from me after that.”

Tom’s cheeks had turned pink and Harry’s did in turn, realising what he’d implied. “He’ll be blacklisting us for whatever company he works for.”

Harry shrugged, clearing his throat. “Don’t care, I don’t fancy working for idiots.”

Tom nodded as he inhaled the smoke and Harry watched it billow around him. It was quiet for a moment, nothing but the sound of Tom exhaling and the bridge creaking surrounding them.

“What did Christopher want? I saw him giving you something.”

Harry blanched, his cheeks flushing red. “Just an autograph,” he replied, a tad too quick. “And he added me to his VIP guestlist for all his matches.”

Tom’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “He’s interested in you,” he said eventually, his voice betraying nothing of what he thought.

“What?” Harry said, surprised.

“I wouldn’t have pegged him as someone who fancied blokes,” Tom commented, pulling on the joint. “Are you planning on going out with him?”

“How the fuck did you deduce that from an autograph?” Harry asked disbelievingly.

Tom shrugged. “It’s obvious. I could tell he was interested this morning when you two were talking.”

Harry shook his head, thinking that it was a good thing Tom and Hermione hadn’t interacted much. “He just offered to buy me a drink sometime if I was interested. I’m not planning on taking him up on it though.”

“Why not? I thought you fancied him.”

“When I was *fifteen*,” Harry huffed, picking at a loose thread on his shoe. “And I told you all, I’m not that into rugby lads.”

Tom hummed, looking amused. “That’s right, you prefer them charming and smart, right?”

“Right,” Harry said faintly, willing his blush to recede. “What about you, any propositions?”

Tom laughed as he exhaled some of the smoke before passing the joint to Harry. “Loads, a notable one from a much older woman.”

Harry’s stomach twisted uncomfortably and he hoped his distaste wasn’t noticeable. “Not interested?”

“Not interested.”

“Because she was old or because she was a woman?” Harry asked boldly, his heart beating against his chest.

Tom stared at him, his eyes sharp as they looked him over. “Both,” he ended up saying, and Harry’s breath caught in his throat.

He busied himself with taking a drag of the joint as he turned the information over in his mind. “Have you ever had a boyfriend?” he asked after another fortifying drag.

Tom scrunched his nose up as if the prospect was distasteful. “No, I haven’t.”

“What about a fling?” Harry asked, desperate to know more.

“A fling?” Tom repeated, looking unimpressed. “Is that what you have had? Flings?” He held his hand out for the joint and Harry passed it over, biting back a grin.

“Yeah,” he said, shrugging. “I’ve never really had a boyfriend, or a girlfriend, not really. They were just flings.”

“Define a fling,” Tom prompted.

Harry laughed. “Alright, well, from experience you’re just friends who are attracted to each other. There’s no love—you’re not in love with a fling even if you can have feelings. And you never really have a romantic relationship, like an exclusive relationship where you go on dates and stuff.” He paused, thinking it over before laughing again. “It’s just sex, really.”

Tom’s eyes flicked over him, his tongue swiping across his bottom lip quickly, catching Harry’s eye. “Then I have not had a fling.”

Harry blinked. “Really?” he asked, his disbelief leaking into his voice.

Tom frowned. “Why do you seem so surprised? I’m not exactly the type of person to socialise for fun.”

“I don’t know, you just—” Harry frowned to himself, thinking it over. “Well, obviously a lot of people are interested in you and I dunno, you just seem like the kind of person who’s had sex before.”

Tom’s frown dissipated, leaving way to an amused smirk. “Are you saying I have sex appeal?”

“Kind of, yeah,” Harry said honestly, laughing nervously.

“Good to know,” Tom said with a smirk, passing the joint back to Harry who took it gratefully. He watched Tom take a drink from the bottle of whiskey, his Adam’s Apple bobbing in his throat. It was both unbelievable and absolutely endearing that Tom hadn’t ever slept with anyone. Though it flooded Harry with an uncomfortable urge to be his first—and last, potentially.

“Have you ever been interested in anyone? You asked me to define a fling, I’m assuming you needed to know what I meant,” Harry said, itching to know more.

“Oh, no, I just wanted to see you come up with a definition for the word,” Tom said with a teasing grin. Harry laughed, surprised. “No, I mean, obviously I found some of the older boys at the orphanage aesthetically pleasing, but my attraction never went beyond that. Not really.”

“Right,” Harry said, studying Tom, allowing himself to look at him properly. He could see it, the closeted queer kid at an orphanage in East London. But he could also see someone who genuinely hadn’t been interested enough to pursue anyone. “More than half the flings I had were disappointing anyway so you’re not missing out on anything.”

“Handjobs behind the school?”

Harry laughed, nodding. “Yep, and blowjobs in the locker room, stuff like that.”

“How crass,” Tom said, his nose scrunching up again.

“Are you more of a romantic?” Harry teased.

“If the minimum of a bed is what you call romantic, then yes,” Tom replied pointedly.

“Fair,” Harry said, grinning. He passed the joint back, letting their fingers brush as he handed it over, that small touch sending electricity down his spine, more than any of his previous flings had done. He took a haughty drink of whiskey to chase the butterflies away.

“Did you see Gaspar fawning over your uncle?” Tom said after a couple seconds of quiet.

“No,” Harry said with an amused frown, “was he absolutely embarrassing?”

“Two drinks in him and he was pestering him into analysing his own lyrics.”

Harry laughed, the sound echoing around the quiet of the lake. It was a very intimate setting and he found he didn’t want to be anywhere else. “Are we friends?” he asked on a whim. He regretted it almost instantly, worried the easy atmosphere would run thin.

Tom eyed him curiously. The silence was suffocating as he took a drag of the joint, letting the smoke fizzle out into the air. “I suppose,” he said at last.

Harry breathed a quiet sigh of relief, his airway easing. “You—do you remember what you said to me? On the first day of school.”

Tom smiled, and Harry felt horrifically vulnerable. “About how we’d never be friends?” Harry nodded, some kind of morbid curiosity forcing him to take part in the conversation. “I’ll admit that I was very frustrated about the circumstances, I didn’t think it was fair that you got to come here during our last year. I still don’t really, despite the fact that you’ve proven how deserving you are. I worked extremely hard over the years to keep my place here, it felt unfair that you just got to appear out of nowhere.”

“I do understand that, I told you I did,” Harry said, feeling uncomfortable.

“*But*,” Tom continued, gesturing with the joint, “I’m also willing to admit that part of it had to do with control. I dislike having unexpected situations sprang on me, especially when they’re out of my control. And I do apologise if that made my words to you overly harsh.”

Harry was speechless for a bit. He didn’t know Tom well, despite how well they got on. But he was rather sure that he wasn’t the type of person to dish out apologies freely, especially for something so trivial. “You don’t have to apologise,” he said, crossing his legs and leaning forward to fiddle with the bottle between them. “You were justified in what you said.”

“But it hurt you,” Tom said casually, as if he wasn’t flaying Harry open. “I can see that it troubled you. With the hindsight I have now, I can recognise that that first day must have been very stressful for you, and I’m glad our classmates gave you the welcome I failed to provide.”

“Yeah but *I* can see how me arriving out of the blue disrupted the balance.”

“Accept the apology, Harry,” Tom said, his eyes reflecting something like fondness and exasperation in the moonlight, “and move on. You were wronged, recognise it for what it was and accept the apology.”

“I—” he cut himself off, not wanting to argue further but struggling to come to terms with what Tom was saying. There were two things Harry had trouble accepting: compliments and apologies. “Okay,” he sighed, “I accept your apology.”

“Good,” Tom said with a smile. “Then I will happily admit that we’re friends—and that I was wrong.”

Harry couldn’t look away from him, so beautiful in the moonlight, with the forest and the dark lake water at his back. “I lied,” he blurted out. His breath caught in his throat, his heart hammering in his chest.

“What?” Tom said with a frown. “Lied about what?” He had an expression of open confusion on his face as he flicked the end of the joint away. There was no malicious intent behind his curiosity and Harry wanted to tell him so badly, wanted to relieve himself of this secret.

“I can’t—I can’t tell you,” he ended up saying. “It’s bad, really bad, something that could get me expelled.”

Tom’s eyes widened but he chuckled. “You’ve piqued my curiosity now.”

Harry was panicking, already having said too much. He wanted to trust Tom, take their friendship that step further to closeness, but if Tom had *any* malicious feelings toward him he could ruin his life with this information.

“I can’t,” Harry repeated, shaking his head regretfully.

Tom was quiet for a while, just watching him, and Harry worried he was about to start guessing. After a while though he just shook his head, laughing quietly to himself before saying, “Marvolo.”

“What?”

“Marvolo is my middle name, it’s what the ‘M’ stands for in my signature.”

Harry blinked in surprise, a smile stretching across his lips. “Marvolo?” he repeated. “Jesus, where the fuck did that come from? Are you royalty or something?”

Tom chuckled and shook his head. “I’ve no idea, my mother gave me my name as her dying wish. She gave birth to me on the steps of the orphanage and used her last moments to give me my name. Tom Riddle for my father, and Marvolo for her father.”

“Wow,” Harry said faintly, piecing together the puzzle. “Do you know either of them?”

Tom shook his head. “My father never recognised me as his, from what information I managed to gather his and my mother’s affair was a drunken one night stand on his part. He’s rich, of course, because the Universe hates me.”

“So you know who he is?” Harry asked, frowning.

“It’s not difficult to find someone who has the same name as you and lives in the same village as your deceased grandfather with a very strange name,” Tom replied with a smile, though Harry could tell there was some bitterness behind it.

Harry sat forward a bit, wanting to be closer to him. “Was there no one else?”

“I have an uncle on my mother’s side but he’s very much insane, he’s either in prison or a psychiatric hospital, so no, there’s no one.”

Harry was quiet, even as he let his hand fall onto Tom’s ankle, his fingers inching under the material of his trousers to trace abstract patterns along the skin there. When he looked up, Tom was watching him with open curiosity in his eyes.

“Well,” Tom said, looking at him expectantly, “was my devastating life story worth your secret?”

Harry grinned, no longer daunted by the prospect of telling Tom, though he didn’t wish to right away. He shook his head. “I’m afraid not,” he said with a smile, “but I can tell you something else, something that I’ve never told anyone.”

Tom’s eyes shone with curiosity and he nodded. “Go on then.”

Harry licked over his lips, biting into the bottom one in a nervous gesture, his fingers rubbing against the skin of Tom’s ankle. “I—you know how I lived with my mum’s sister after my parents died?” Tom nodded and Harry dropped his eyes to where his fingers touched his ankle. “They were awful. Hermione and Ron, and Sirius and Remus obviously, know about the abuse, I mean I had bruises to show for it. But, I never told them—I don’t know why, it felt humiliating I suppose? It felt stupid. But, I didn’t have a room there, a bedroom. My cousin had two and my aunt and uncle had one.” He stopped talking, the words unwilling to come out after having stayed locked up for so long.

“Where did you sleep, Harry?” Tom asked softly.

He cleared his throat and smiled, ignoring the ache in his chest. “You know how some houses have a cupboard under the stairs?”

He didn’t look up but he could hear Tom’s frown in his voice. “For storage?”

“That’s one way to put it,” Harry said with a laugh.

“How old were you?”

Harry sighed, sitting back against the barrier and looking up at the sky, so grateful to be able to see the stars, the vast openness of the night sky after countless nights locked in the tiny cupboard with nothing but sawdust filling the ceiling.

“From ages eight to seventeen.”

“Nine years?” Tom asked, disbelieving.

“When I got older I’d sneak out and sleep on the sofa, or outside in the summer, because I, like, literally could barely fit under there anymore,” Harry replied. “I’d get back in the cupboard before the sun came up.”

“Harry—” Tom said, and there was an edge to his voice that made Harry look at him. He looked away quickly, clearing his throat, his cheeks flushing.

“It’s stupid,” he said, waving a hand in the air.

“It’s not stupid,” Tom said sharply, “it’s abuse. Yes, it’s stupid and inherently pointless—a show of power. But how you feel about it isn’t stupid.”

“I don’t feel anything about it.”

“Your demeanour begs to differ,” Tom replied in a whisper, leaning forward until he was close enough to tilt Harry’s chin back. “You’re embarrassed, years of humiliation having drilled into your head that it was something to be embarrassed about. You’re angry, your anger issues did come from somewhere, you know? And I doubt they all stem from grief.”

Harry’s face was flaming, though he couldn’t drop his gaze with Tom holding his chin in place. He bit onto the inside of his cheek, his other hand still resting on Tom’s ankle. “Okay,” he whispered back.

“Out of curiosity,” Tom said, his fingers migrating from Harry’s chin to his cheek, “did you never tell anyone? A teacher or someone.”

Harry ignored the stab in his chest—of old betrayal and hurt. “I told a teacher when I was eleven. She decided to give them the benefit of the doubt and called them into school to ask about it. My uncle broke two of my ribs when he got home. I don’t think they ever healed properly. I never tried telling anyone again.”

An owl hooted in the distance, the noise filling the space between them for a brief moment.

“Oh, Harry,” Tom murmured, his thumb stroking along his cheekbone. Harry leant into it, his eyes fluttering shut. He’d so rarely received tender touches. “I’m never gonna get the big secret out of you, am I?” he said after a few seconds, soft amusement curling in his voice.

“I’ll tell you,” Harry said, smiling into the hand against his skin, “if you give me something just as incriminating.”

Tom laughed lightly, pinching Harry’s cheek softly before he shuffled back to his side of the bridge. Harry felt dreadfully cold without him there but he opened his eyes anyway. “I’m not sure I have anything *as* incriminating as whatever it is you have, but I can tell you something that could get me into a certain amount of trouble.”

“Go ahead,” Harry said quietly, taking a drink of whiskey.

Tom eyed him and took the bottle for himself, taking a haughty drink. “I handpicked every single person—aside from you—in our year,” he announced.

“What?” Harry said with a laugh, confused. “What do you mean?”

“It *means*,” Tom said with a smile, “that I ensured only the people I wanted to move up years with me actually did. I sabotaged performances and auditions of people I didn’t want to work with in seventh year, and I made sure the people I *did* want were brilliant and got better roles. I started doing it in fourth year until I ended up with the only people I wanted with me this year. That is in part why I was so frustrated when you turned up.”

Harry’s jaw had dropped, a disbelieving laugh escaping him. “You’re kidding?” he said, and Tom shook his head. “You absolute control freak.”

Tom laughed, a guilty smile on his face. “I never said I wasn’t.”

“God those people must hate you.”

“Oh, I assure you, they do.”

“Did they never complain?” Harry asked, in utter disbelief at this tale.

“They did,” Tom said thoughtfully. “But at the end of the day it came down to my word against theirs. Usually they were entitled brats, and so I just said that they were jealous, and that prior to their expulsion they bullied me and—*voilà*, I was believed.”

“That’s like—evil villain shit,” Harry said, baffled.

“Thank you,” Tom said with a wry smile, and Harry laughed, completely endeared by him despite what he was admitting to. “Incriminating enough?”

“I suppose,” Harry said with a nervous shrug. “Though you still have the high ground because I can’t actually prove your thing, it would be fairly easy to prove mine.”

“Go on,” Tom prompted, his eyes narrowed in scrutiny.

Harry cleared his throat, looking behind him. They were still utterly alone. “I—” he laughed, astounded by the fact that he was about to reveal this— “I never went to the Conservatoire.”

“*What*?” Tom hissed, his lips parted in shock. He was silent for a while, his eyes searching Harry as if he were looking for a lie. “How the fuck do you fake that?”

“Long story short,” Harry said, “Sirius knows someone who works there and paid him to create a file for me—entirely fake of course, I never went anywhere but public school. That file probably doesn’t exist anymore, it was only up long enough for the people here to check.”

Tom stared at him with wide eyes before he laughed, knocking his head back onto the barrier. “You have got to be kidding. You lied to get in?”

“It was Sirius’s idea,” Harry explained. “He felt so bad about everything that had happened and he knew it was my dream to come here, so he pulled some strings and set everything up.

He knew that they wouldn't give his request a second thought unless it was backed up by a strong background."

"Harry—oh my god, you could get *expelled* for this."

"I prefaced this whole thing by telling you I could get expelled for it," he said with a laugh, enjoying how shocked Tom was. "Promise to keep it secret and I shouldn't go anywhere."

"Well, of course I'm not gonna blab," Tom said with an eye roll. "I'm just saying this could go horrendously."

"It won't," Harry said confidently. "There's no reason the teachers would check again, and if it gets found out after we've graduated there's no harm to it."

Tom looked like he wanted to argue but he just sighed, looking up at the night sky. "You're mental," he murmured. "Roll a fucking joint."

Harry laughed, obliging. He took his time, watching as Tom seemed to overcome his shock, sighing a couple times before twisting and lying down on the bridge, looking up at the stars. Harry followed, lying next to him before lighting up the joint.

"I knew there was something," Tom murmured, turning his head to look at him.

Harry smiled, exhaling the smoke. "I could tell you suspected."

Tom shook his head, laughing quietly. It was incredibly intimate, and *so* peaceful. To lie under the stars, where no one could see them, the water rippling gently beneath them, passing a joint back and forth. Harry loved it.

"What's your favourite colour?" he asked, grinning.

Tom rolled his eyes, plucking the joint from between Harry's fingers. "Green," he replied. "You?"

Harry hummed. "Gold," he said, "but not gold like the metal or whatever, golden like sunlight is sometimes golden."

"Very specific," Tom teased, sitting up on his elbows to have a drink, passing the bottle to Harry when he'd finished. They'd drunk half of it already, and Harry was starting to realise that he was quite sloshed. "When is your birthday?"

Harry looked at him, surprised at the question. "31st of July," he replied. "When's yours?" he asked, discarding the fact that he already knew, just happy to have Tom divulge the information of his own volition.

"31st of December."

"Soon then," Harry said, taking the joint back for himself. "Shall we do something? Like order a takeaway—or we could go out to that Italian restaurant in the village."

Tom was looking at him, a small frown on his face. “I don’t really celebrate my birthday.”

Harry shrugged. “So? It’s not ‘cause in the past you had no one to celebrate with that you never have to celebrate at all. I’m offering, we can do whatever you want.”

Tom was quiet before he looked back up at the stars. “I’ll think about it,” he murmured.

The silence was disrupted suddenly, the sound of talking emanating from near the castle and coming closer to the lake.

They looked at each other and Tom took the joint, putting it out against his shoe to mask the smoke. He peeked through the barrier and turned back to Harry. “It’s Alphard,” he whispered, “with a boy.”

“One of ours?” Harry asked, equally as quiet.

Tom shook his head, pulling him up to have a look. They ended up with Harry looking through the barrier, Tom pressed to his back. “I think that’s a boy he hooked up with last year, a language student,” he whispered in Harry’s ear.

“What the fuck am I gonna do if he’s still there when we go back?” Harry asked, turning back to look at Tom once Alphard disappeared into the chapel. They were closer than he’d expected but he’d grown a bit desensitised to Tom’s proximity.

“You could—” Tom started, drifting off— “You could sleep in my room,” he whispered, “I have an extra bed, remember?”

Harry blinked, snapping his gaze up to Tom’s eyes since it had somehow drifted to his mouth. “You’d be okay with that?”

“‘Course,” Tom said with a shrug. “I’m not that much of a bastard you know.”

Harry laughed, pushing him back until he lied back down and they resumed their stargazing. “You are though, sometimes.”

“Piss off,” he said, pinching Harry before reclaiming the joint and lighting it again. He looked ethereal in the glow of the lighter, his long eyelashes standing out in the warm glow that made his freckles visible.

“Do you know when them lot are leaving tomorrow?”

“Early,” Tom replied, sucking in the smoke, “around eight o’clock, I think.”

“We probably won’t be up then.”

“No, knowing Theo he’ll come knocking though.”

“Brilliant,” Harry said sarcastically, putting his arms behind his head, “he’ll go mental if he sees us in the same room.”

Tom snorted. “Can you imagine the scandal? *Sleeping* in the same room.”

Harry laughed, delighted at how easygoing Tom was being. He hoped their dynamic would stay like this throughout the holidays.

“How did you like the play then?” Tom asked after a bout of silence, turning his head on the wooden bridge to look at him.

Harry smiled, getting the feeling Tom was quite drunk, or high, for how chatty he was. His cockney accent kept shining through on some of the words, and Harry found it wholly endearing. “It was brilliant,” he said truthfully. “How did you find it? Would you dread doing such a long play again or did you enjoy it?”

“Bit of both,” Tom said, taking a drag of the joint before reaching over and placing it between Harry’s lips. “I think I’d have to really know the people I was working with to do something so long, like I know you lot. Because, if we’re being honest, Theo’s right, I wouldn’t have been half as good as I was if you all weren’t good.”

Harry smiled, removing one of his arms from behind his head to take the joint out of his mouth. “I know what you mean. We were all very good, weren’t we?”

Tom smiled up at the stars. “You’ve no idea how much *better* we were than previous years’ December productions.”

“Really?”

“Really,” Tom confirmed. “I played in the seventh year production last year, like Ben or Viola played in ours, you know. And I wasn’t nearly as good as I was today—or than in my audition—because the people I was with were just *not good*. We had no chemistry and they refused to spend more time studying characters or going over scenes, like we did almost every night.”

“Did they all graduate?”

Tom shook his head. “Nope, half of them did I think, they did okay in their end of year play. Even if it was a bit messy.”

“Do you think we’ll all graduate?”

“Definitely,” Tom replied, smiling at him. “Handpicked by me, remember? I wouldn’t pick people who wouldn’t get through.”

“What about me?” Harry asked with a grin. “You didn’t pick me.”

“You’ll be fine,” Tom replied, that easy smile still on his lips. “The professors love you, you work hard, you fit in with us seamlessly, and you’re good.”

Harry hummed. “I hope so, it’d be really embarrassing if I did all this to get in and ended up not graduating.”

Tom laughed. “It would, yeah.”

“How did you get in?” Harry asked curiously. “Did someone at the orphanage help you send in an audition?”

“Yeah,” Tom replied, looking up at the stars. Harry watched him, how his hair fell back, how his eyes shone in the moonlight, how his sharp jaw moved around the words. “I saw a documentary about the school or something on the old black and white TV we rented at the orphanage for special events when I was eleven, I think. I’d always loved reading, and I particularly enjoyed plays because I could act out the characters in my head. After seeing the documentary I started acting out the plays out loud in my room when no one else was there. There was a girl who worked there and I brought up the idea of wanting to audition. She found it funny, like it was a silly request from a child. She indulged me though and asked to see my acting, so I did. I think she thought it was good because she said that there was no harm in giving it a go.”

He sighed, pausing for a couple seconds as an owl hooted in the distance. “She explained to me that I shouldn’t get my hopes up, that schools like here are very exclusive and usually only open up to privileged people who have the necessary connections to get in. I knew all this already but I listened. She rented out some film equipment, with her own money, and helped me do everything. If I remember correctly I did something from *Cyrano de Bergerac*, and then she got the tape and sent it with all the required information. Apparently it was Dumbledore who reviewed my tape and recognised my potential. A few months after sending it I got a visit from him in person and he told me the school was offering me a scholarship.” He smiled and turned to look at Harry. “Amelia, the girl, was over the moon, as was I, obviously. Dumbledore gave us all the papers we needed to fill out and that next September I moved here.”

Harry was smiling, the joint having gone out in his hand. “That’s adorable,” he said. Tom rolled his eyes, though his small smile was still in place. “I wish we could’ve done all our years here together,” he added quietly.

“Me too,” Tom said in a whisper. “I wouldn’t have sabotaged you,” he added with a grin.

“Good to know,” Harry said with a smile, reaching out to grab the lighter, his fingers brushing Tom’s as he did so. He lit the joint and took a couple drags before handing it over to him.

“Although you probably would’ve been my primary competition. Maybe I wouldn’t have liked you,” he commented, mischief in his eyes.

Harry laughed. “Am I not competition now?”

“I’ve already asserted myself as the best,” Tom said with a smirk, and Harry laughed again.

“You’re so full of yourself,” he teased.

“I’m confident,” Tom shrugged. “Although, I did—there was a minute before we got the casting for *Hamlet* where I thought that there was a chance you’d get the lead,” he confessed.

"*Really*?" Harry asked, baffled. "They would've never given me the lead, not for *Hamlet*. And anyway, I'm willing to admit you're better than me."

Tom regarded him for a second. "Your audition knocked me off my feet. I was so surprised by how utterly *good* you were. It was intimidating because on top of being good, you were *different*. You waltzed in with an audition none of us would've touched—a very niche play, and a female character. It was bold, and it surprised me. It annoyed me too, but that's neither here nor there."

Harry laughed, the sound echoing across the lake, while his cheeks flushed. "Well, if it's any consolation, I felt very inadequate after your audition."

"That does make me feel a bit better," Tom said with a grin. Harry laughed again, reaching out to pinch his arm.

He dropped his head back onto the bridge and looked up at the stars, basking in the quiet of Tom's presence. "Do you know anything about the stars?" he asked after a few minutes of silence in which they finished the joint.

"No," Tom replied, looking at him in open curiosity.

"All the Black family are named after stars and constellations," Harry said quietly, "so Sirius taught me all about them when I was little. Here, look." He shuffled closer to Tom until their sides were pressed together. He squinted at the sky and got his bearings, raising his arm to point up. "See, follow my finger, see that super bright star?"

"Yeah," Tom murmured.

"That's Sirius," Harry said happily, "the brightest star in the sky. He's in the Canis Major constellation, which," he moved his finger, tracing the stars together with the tip, "goes like this. It looks like a dog—a very pointy one."

Tom laughed lightly. "I think I can see it."

"Good, then you have—" Harry's breath hitched as Tom put his head on his shoulder, resting there and looking up at the stars— "Regulus." He pointed to another bright star. "Regulus is the brightest star in the Leo constellation, which goes like this." Tom followed the motion. "That was Sirius's brother's name, Regulus."

"What about Alphard?" Tom asked in a murmur, sending shivers down Harry's neck.

Harry twisted his finger in the air, searching. "Ah," he said, "there he is. It's very far away and the brightest star in the Hydra constellation, which I can't quite make out."

"What others are there?" Tom asked quietly.

Harry took a steadying breath, butterflies squirming in his stomach. This was the single most romantic situation he'd ever been in. "There's Andromeda," he whispered, pointing at the constellation. "It's a constellation, Sirius's aunt is named after it. So she's Alphard's great aunt, though she's also estranged from the rest of the Black family."

Harry went on to point out the Orion constellation and within it the Bellatrix star, as well as the Cygnus constellation, and the Arcturus star, giving snippets of information about the Black family as he went on.

“There’s a big crossover between Greek Mythology and Astronomy,” Tom remarked from where he was still pressed against Harry’s shoulder. Harry had caved at some point and let his cheek press into Tom’s hair.

Harry nodded against him. “That’s because the Greeks made the first mappings out of the stars. Well, the ones that we know anyway. And the names of our planets come from the Roman version of the Greek Gods. You know, Mars as Ares, Venus as Aphrodite, things like that.”

“What are all the planets called?” Tom asked. “I’ve never been into science so I never bothered learning them.”

Harry smiled, it was somehow endearing that Tom knew so much about the nichest plays or pieces of classical music, and yet knew nothing of something as commonly taught as the Solar System. “In order from closest to the sun to furthest: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto.”

Tom hummed. “Hermes, Aphrodite, Ares, Zeus, Cronos, Ouranos, Poseidon, and Hades.”

Harry smiled. “Funny how you know the Greek equivalents off the top of your head, but don’t even know which planets are in our Solar System.”

“Well,” he replied, his fingertips touching Harry’s hand between them, “I know now, don’t I?”

“Yeah,” Harry whispered, pressing his nose into Tom’s hair and closing his eyes. He couldn’t believe he got to do this. He could settle for friendship if he got to have Tom in this capacity, sharing in this tenderness and easy intimacy.

“I can’t believe Alphard’s hooking up with Sam again!” came Theo’s distinctive voice from the grounds, cutting through the peaceful silence.

Harry and Tom looked at each other, much closer than was strictly necessary. They sat up slowly and peaked through the barriers on the bridge.

“Where are Tom and Harry, anyway? Did you not find them?” Gaspar asked as they made their way towards the chapel, swaying on their feet.

“I looked everywhere!” Theo exclaimed.

“I saw them leave much earlier,” Rick said. “Maybe they’ve gone back already.”

“What’s Harry gonna do if Sam’s still in their room?” Abraxas asked.

Harry snickered quietly and Tom laughed into his shoulder, reaching up to press a hand to Harry’s mouth to keep him quiet. Harry’s cheeks flushed but he tried not to let it affect him.

“I dunno,” Theo replied. “Sofa maybe, or if he’s off somewhere with Tom maybe he’ll get an invitation into his room.”

“Maybe they’re already in Tom’s room,” Rick said with a laugh.

“Oh maybe! I’ll check when we get back,” Theo said.

Tom clicked his tongue. “Nosy twat,” he whispered in Harry’s ear, making him laugh against the hand still pressed to his mouth.

“Don’t,” Gaspar said, “you’re so nosy. Just leave them alone. Imagine you open the door and they’re shagging, what’re you gonna do then?”

“Burn the memory in my mind to wank off to later,” Theo replied with a laugh, the others making disapproving noises at him.

“Pig,” Abraxas said.

“He’s not lying as well,” Tom murmured. “He’s depraved.”

Harry laughed again, biting into Tom’s hand gently, making him laugh as he pressed harder. The others’ voices fizzled out as they got to the chapel, closing the door behind them. Harry watched the lights going on as they moved further through the building.

Tom let go and shuffled back.

“They’re obsessed with us,” Harry said as he turned to face Tom who was taking a drink from the bottle.

“They’re rich kids, Harry, famous at that. They learnt to gossip before they learnt to walk.”

Harry laughed, taking the bottle from Tom. “I think I just saw your light go on.”

Tom turned around with narrowed eyes and huffed. “He’s too nosy for his own good.”

Harry smiled, taking out a cigarette. “What time is it?”

“Past one, I think. Maybe two, I can’t see the clock properly,” Tom replied, tapping a cigarette out of Harry’s pack for himself.

“It’s late enough for me to admit that I’m really fucking drunk then,” Harry said with a laugh.

Tom snorted, leaning forward so that Harry could light his cigarette. “Honestly? Me too.”

“Are you drunk enough to accept a jump in the lake?” Harry proposed mischievously. In all good consciousness he knew it wasn’t a good idea, but it sounded fun.

Tom laughed, shaking his head. “No. No way.”

“Come on,” Harry urged. “It’ll be fun, a quick jump then right back out and we can go to bed. It’ll sober us up so we’ll have less of a hangover tomorrow.”

Tom looked at him incredulously. “We’ll get hypothermia.”

“Nah,” Harry said confidently, brushing it off, “we’ll be fine.”

“I’m already cold,” Tom complained.

“You’ll appreciate how warm you are when we go back,” Harry countered.

Tom was silent for a few seconds, looking to be at war with himself. “You’ll do it too?”

“‘Course,” Harry said. “I don’t issue a challenge without doing it myself.”

Tom smiled, looking to the side as he finished his cigarette. Harry watched him, waiting him out as he smoked his own.

“Alright,” Tom said finally. “Okay, come on.”

Harry laughed, not really realising what he was getting himself into, just happy to have Tom agree. “Brilliant,” he said as he stood up.

Tom followed, leaning over the barrier to eye the water sceptically. “Our clothes will drown us, the water’s definitely gonna shock us.”

Harry nodded. “Okay then,” he said, setting his glasses down and pulling his jumper over his head, his t-shirt following. Thank God for the whiskey.

Tom’s eyes widened as he watched him.

Harry toed his shoes off, unbuckling his belt. “Come on then, I don’t fancy waiting around in my underwear for you to catch up, I’m freezing,” he said with a laugh.

Tom’s mouth moved wordlessly, perhaps he was shocked at Harry’s stupidity, before he rolled his eyes and took his own jumper and shirt off. And then Harry was faced with the very real problem of seeing Tom shirtless again. At least the sight warmed his cheeks right back up as he unbuttoned his trousers and pushed them off until he was standing in his boxers, his skin covered in goosebumps.

He watched Tom strip, the sight of him unbuttoning his slacks enough to make his mouth water.

“This is the stupidest thing I’ve ever done,” Tom stated as he straightened out, his clothes in a pile beside Harry’s.

Harry laughed, delighted by the absurdity of the situation. He bent down and retrieved the bottle of whiskey, raising it in Tom’s direction before drinking down the equivalent of three shots. He handed it over then, saying, “You’ll need it.”

Tom sighed and took the bottle. Harry took the time to analyse every inch of him, coming to the conclusion that he was simply gorgeous. The most gorgeous person he’d ever seen. His

shoulders were broad, his stomach toned, his legs long. Harry wanted to lick every inch of him.

“Okay?” Tom said as he set the bottle back down, it wasn’t quite empty but it wasn’t far off.

Harry took a deep breath and set his glasses down as he nodded. “Alright come on,” he said, a certain amount of giddiness in his voice as he climbed onto the barrier.

Tom followed, laughing disbelieving as they stood there. “I can’t believe you’re making me do this.”

“Hold my hand,” Harry said, holding his own out. Tom took it, steadying himself. “Ready?” he asked, laughter bubbling up inside him.

“Yeah,” Tom replied reluctantly.

“Okay, jump together on three,” Harry said, telling himself that this was worth it if he got to hold Tom’s hand. “1…2…3!”

Harry jumped with a laugh and Tom followed, clutching onto his hand. The water was *freezing* when he crashed into it and he held onto Tom’s hand like a lifeline. After the immobilising shock of it passed, he came up, the adrenaline induced laughter pouring out of his throat.

Tom gasped next to him, laughing as well. “Get me the fuck out of here,” he said, holding onto Harry just as hard.

Harry’s laughter carried across the lake as he struggled to take in a proper breath through his chattering teeth. He started swimming towards the bank that was only a few metres away, still holding Tom’s hand in his.

They climbed out of the water, clinging to each other to not fall back in.

“We get our stuff and back in,” Tom said through chattering teeth, his lips turning blue and his whole chest covered in goosebumps. Harry couldn’t stop grinning.

They got back up to the bridge, Harry slipping a couple times in the grass.

“Come on,” Tom said once they had their clothes and everything in their arms, holding his hand out. Harry took it gladly, letting Tom tug him over to the chapel. He laughed again, thinking about what a sight they must have made, rushing across the grounds dripping wet and freezing.

“Shower?” Harry said as they got to the front door. “We need to warm up, your lips are blue.”

“I’m gonna fucking die,” Tom said dramatically, his hand shaking as he opened the door. It was warmer inside but not enough to warm them up.

“You go in the shower first,” Harry said, ushering him upstairs.

“No, you’ll die of hypothermia in the time it takes me to warm up,” Tom whispered, dragging Harry into his room where he dumped his clothes on his bed. “Just come in with me,” he said, “our underwear’s already soaked.”

“Okay,” Harry agreed immediately. Even without how cold he was he’d be mad to not accept the offer of a joint shower.

Tom grabbed his shower stuff and a couple towels. “My fucking fingers are numb,” he said as he opened his bedroom door again, leading the way to the shower.

“What the fuck are you two idiots doing?” Theo whispered with a laugh, appearing out of his room. He was standing hunched over in his boxers, hair messy, a lazy grin on his face.

Harry turned to him, his shoulders bunched up with how contracted his muscles were against the cold.

“You jumped in the lake, didn’t you?” Theo said with a grin, shaking his head.

“Shut up, Theo,” Tom said, pulling Harry into the bathroom and closing the door behind them. He turned the shower on, stepping to the side as he waited for it to warm up. The shower in the chapel was brilliant, perfect pressure, the water was always hot enough, *but* the stall was tiny. Harry couldn’t wait.

“Okay, in,” Tom instructed, pushing him into the stall when it started to steam up, following him in. They both sighed in relief as the hot water hit them, sharing the spray. Harry felt like he could breathe again, his ribcage finally expanding enough to give his lungs leeway. “That’s the last fucking time I’m doing that,” Tom said, his voice deeper than it had been, the syllables more drawn out. His eyes were closed as he let his muscles relax under the hot spray.

Harry laughed, putting his head under the water, letting the warmth seep into his hair. “You were grinning the whole time,” he said. “You had fun.”

“Shut up,” Tom replied, pinching his waist, a smile on his face. He turned around to let the hot water run along his broad back, and Harry was unabashed in his ogling. They were so close, their skin bumping constantly. “Did you see the sock on your door?”

“What? No,” Harry replied, frowning. “How the fuck am I gonna get some clothes?”

“I’ll lend you some,” Tom said as if it were nothing as he turned back around.

Feeling his cheeks go bright red, Harry turned around quickly, shivering as the hot water hit his back. “Thanks,” he replied belatedly. He jumped a bit as Tom put his hands on his waist.

“Sorry,” he murmured in his ear, leaning down to grab his bottle of shampoo.

“Can I use your stuff as well?” Harry asked, mind reeling at the prospect of wearing Tom’s clothes, smelling like his soap, in his room.

“‘Course,” Tom replied, handing him the bottle of shampoo, his arm looping around Harry’s waist to do so.

Harry turned around to get his hair out of the stream of water. Already it smelled so much like Tom. Harry watched him work the soap into his hair, doing the same a second later, working the long day and lake water from it.

“Are your fingers still numb?” Harry asked.

Tom grinned as he stepped under the spray to rinse his hair. Harry’s mouth went dry at the sight, the soapy water running down his body, some disappearing under his loose boxers. “No, although a few seconds more and I’d’ve lost them I think.”

Harry snorted, pushing him out of the water to rinse his own hair, the shampoo starting to drip into his eyes. “You’re such a drama queen,” he said.

Tom laughed lightly, and before Harry had time to raise his own hands, Tom’s fingers were in his hair, rinsing the shampoo from it. Harry sighed without meaning to, the kind of sigh where his shoulders sagged and his whole body relaxed into a feeling. His eyes were already closed and he was thankful for it, unsure if he’d manage to withhold from kissing Tom with them being so close.

His fingers worked gently, scratching at Harry’s scalp in a way that had him biting his lip to avoid any embarrassing moans from slipping out.

“Which are the ribs that got broken?” Tom asked quietly, his hands leaving Harry’s hair and trailing down his neck.

Harry’s eyes fluttered open slowly, taking a few seconds to process the question. “Er—these ones,” he said, raising a hand and pressing his fingers into two ribs on his left side. Tom’s hand joined his, his fingers skirting along the ribs.

“Do they hurt?” he asked, pressing down a bit.

“Only if you press hard or if I fall wrong or something,” Harry explained. “They’re healed but I didn’t rest enough during the healing period, I wasn’t allowed to. And then with playing rugby later on, it just made the whole thing worse.”

Tom hummed, his hands splaying across Harry’s ribs, a small frown on his face. “Would you not be able to do anything if you went to see someone?”

“Like a doctor?” Harry asked and Tom nodded. “I don’t think so, there’s not really a remedy to fix broken ribs except rest.”

Tom nodded, the pads of his fingers running along the two ribs before leaving Harry’s skin altogether. “Move over, I didn’t actually get to finish rinsing my own hair,” he said, pinching Harry’s waist again.

Harry smiled, moving to the side and bending over to pick up the other bottle of soap. He squeezed some out onto his hand and handed it over to Tom once he’d finished with his hair.

It smelled so much like him and Harry took great pleasure in lathering himself in it, hoping the smell would stick well into the next day.

They shared the spray of water as they rinsed off, their elbows and hips bumping into each other a few times. When they'd finished they stayed under the water for a few more minutes, making sure they'd warmed up properly.

"I'll go and dry off in my room and bring you some clothes in five minutes, okay? You dry off here," Tom said softly, his eyes shut under the water, his features holding a softness to them that Harry hadn't really seen before, his relaxed and sleepy demeanour very endearing.

"Okay," Harry replied quietly, pushing his hair back from his forehead. He watched Tom for a second, allowing himself the pleasure to do so. His throat was bared as he let the water run through his hair, his Adam's Apple sticking out, and the thin chain he wore around his neck —that Harry was dying to know about—hanging loosely against his collarbones. As his eyes drifted downwards, Harry swallowed, his boxers were hanging onto his hips, sticking to his thighs, and the happy trail of hair running from his stomach down into boxers actually made his mouth water.

"Do you prefer a t-shirt or a jumper?"

"T-shirt," Harry replied after a moment's deliberation, snapping out of his mindless admiration. As much as he would love to wear one of Tom's jumpers, he tended to run hot during the night.

"Okay, do you want some trousers or just boxers?"

Harry blushed, only just realising he'd be wearing Tom's underwear. "Just boxers are fine."

"Okay," Tom said, opening his eyes and shutting the water off. He rubbed the water out of his eyes and opened the shower stall, leaning out to grab one of the towels. Harry watched as he towelled his hair off quickly before wrapping it around his waist. "I'll be back in five minutes."

"Okay," Harry replied, stepping out of the shower after him. When Tom had left he grabbed the other towel and got himself dry, stripping his boxers off and hanging them over the shower door to dry.

When Tom knocked on the door Harry wrapped the towel low on his waist and opened it. Tom was only wearing a new pair of boxers but he was dry, his damp hair pushed back in a very attractive manner. He was like a wet dream come to life.

"Thanks," Harry said with a smile as he took the clothes. Tom smiled, shuffling into the bathroom to hang his own soaking wet boxers next to Harry's. His hand rested on Harry's waist as he went past him in the small space. He left afterwards, closing the door behind him.

Harry took a shaky breath. He finished drying himself off and only then did he dare pick up the clean pair of boxers; they were plain black, like all of Tom's boxers Harry had had the privilege of seeing. He stepped into them, blushing at feeling the material against his skin and

seeing how they hung loosely around his hips, slipping down with how big they were on him. They rested criminally low but didn't fall past his arse, revealing only a bit of the skin that was usually hidden by his boxers.

He pulled the t-shirt on next. He'd never seen Tom wearing it, a plain black aside from the red rose on the back. It was massive on Harry, revealing his collarbones. He looked in the mirror and blushed again, a small smile spreading across his lips at the sight of himself in Tom's clothes, as if he were his boyfriend.

He shook his head at himself and traipsed back across the hallway. He had the decency to knock on the door, just in case, but stepped in a second later at the hum from inside. He closed the door behind himself, not letting his eyes linger on Tom—still shirtless—in the lamp light. He hung the towel on one of the pegs at the back of the door.

"I made up your bed," Tom informed him, making Harry's mind echo with *your bed* over and over again.

"Thanks," he replied with a smile. "I'm shattered."

"Me too," Tom whispered, sitting on his bed against the headboard.

Harry went to the other bed and sat down, feeling shy as he felt Tom's eyes on him. The bed was soft, the quilt just shaken out with Tom putting the cover on.

"I put your clothes on the desk," Tom whispered, "and your glasses on the nightstand."

"Thanks," Harry replied again, shuffling onto the bed until he was pressed face down into the pillow, sighing contentedly. "Is it already three o'clock?" he asked, squinting at the clock he couldn't quite make out.

"Yeah," Tom whispered back, "best get some sleep and hope those idiots don't wake us up tomorrow morning."

Harry hummed, already feeling the first wisps of sleep start to pull at him. He stretched his arms out and stuffed them under the pillow while he bunched the quilt up between his legs. He hadn't been so relaxed in so long, still feeling the ghost of Tom's fingers in his hair. "Night Tom," he murmured sleepily, his eyes having closed at some point.

"Night Harry," Tom said quietly.

He heard the click of the light being turned off moments later and fell asleep to the sound of Tom shuffling about in his bed.

Chapter End Notes

okay Act II!! tell me what you thought in the comments! Quick thank you to everyone who has read, left kudos, and commented so far! I know this fic is long asf and an AU at that so I really appreciate anyone who takes the time to read and show their appreciation.

the play Tom auditioned for the school with is Cyrano de Bergerac by Edmond Rostand, and everything cited in this Act is ofc from Hamlet by Shakespeare.

Act III is coming Tuesday and is 60k lol, so I'll see you then! Don't hesitate to pop in on Tumblr to chat I would be more than happy to xx

Chapter 3: Act III

Chapter Notes

hello everyone! Act III is here (it almost wasn't because I was so late in reading over it before posting lol)

- Just for scene 6 the song *Fairytale of New York* features, the instrumental version is in the playlist I made for this fic, but for the added whimsy I'd recommend listening to the normal version (by The Pogues ft. Kirsty MacColl) just for that part of the scene. You can listen to it because it's almost Christmas, keep me in your thoughts as you do because I listened to it on repeat in July while writing that scene LMAO

I hope you like this Act, it's definitely my second favourite (second only to Act V). Happy reading xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Act III

— Scene one —

“Good morning sleepy heads!”

Harry groaned, and he was sure he heard an echoing groan from the other bed in the room.

“Well, tell us before we go, what naughty business did you two get up to last night?”

Harry cracked his eyes open, his vision blurry due to sleep and his lack of glasses. Theo had perched at the foot of Tom’s bed while the others lurked in the doorway. The room was cast in barely there light from the grey sky outside, daylight not quite breaking through.

“Fuck off,” Harry croaked, his throat dry. The words echoed in his head, signalling the beginning of a pounding headache.

“Go away,” Tom mumbled, kicking Theo rather viciously. Harry smiled lazily into his pillow, endeared by Tom’s sleepy voice.

He stretched, pressing his face into the pillow. He was so *tired*, he just wanted to go back to sleep. To his dismay, Theo whistled, the others snickering.

“You look ravishing, Harry, darling,” he said in a very pompous voice. Harry was satisfied to hear the sound of another kick landing on him, followed by his faint ‘*oof*’. “Well,” Theo continued, though there was a strained quality to his voice from the kick, “I’m dying to know what happened, what with you two sneaking back in the middle of the night half naked, showering together, and then *sleeping* together.”

“We’re in separate beds you twat,” Tom mumbled, obviously unwilling to let go of the sleep clinging to him.

“The shower?” Theo prompted, and Harry could tell the others were eager to know.

He groaned, barely believing that he’d showered with Tom himself. “We jumped in the lake. We didn’t want to die of hypothermia,” he explained mechanically, trying to be as to-the-point as possible.

“Were you *naked*?” Theo asked in what he obviously believed to be a sultry tone of voice. Feeling fingers trailing up the back of his thigh, Harry kicked out, shaking Theo’s hand off him.

“No,” Tom snapped. “Get out.”

“Come on, Theo,” Gaspar said, sounding amused. “Leave them alone.”

Theo hummed, though Harry couldn't see where he was or what he was doing as he succumbed and closed his eyes again. "Alright then, happy holidays you two, we'll see you soon."

"Yes, bye," Harry replied into his pillows. "Happy Christmas."

Theo laughed, and Harry felt him bending down by his bed and planting a kiss on his hair before ruffling it. He let it happen, only feeling a slight jolt of jealousy when he heard him do the same to Tom.

"Fuck *off*," Tom snapped, not taking the affection silently as Harry had opted to do.

"Sorry for last night, Harry," Alphard called, "and happy holidays!"

"S'fine, happy holidays," Harry mumbled back. The others shouted variations of 'Merry Christmas' and 'happy holidays' that Harry just grunted in response to.

He listened, his eyes still closed against the pillow, as his friends left the chapel. A cool chill and a silence settled in as the door clicked shut behind them, officially commencing the two weeks of solitude with Tom.

Harry sighed, half content, half annoyed.

"Wankers," Tom muttered from the other side of the room.

Harry smiled again, cracking his eyes open once more, happy to see Tom in the other bed, the quilt pulled up to his shoulders, letting Harry glance at some of the unblemished skin there. He hummed in agreement.

Tom looked over at him, his eyes raking the expanse of Harry's body, making him feel dreadfully exposed. He'd discarded his quilt in the night, leaving it to cool against the wall while he was sprawled on his front, his legs vulnerable to the cool air. His t-shirt had ridden up in the night, bunching up around his ribcage, leaving his lower back and stomach on display.

"I'm thirsty," Tom said, sighing as he dropped his head back onto the pillows and closed his eyes. Harry couldn't take his eyes off him, the column of his throat, the sleepy flush on his cheeks, the imprint of his pillow on his skin, how unruly his hair was.

"Me too," Harry mumbled, his voice croaky with sleep. "I'll go get us some water," he said with a sigh, dragging himself up and away from the warm imprint in the mattress. His feet hit the ground, and with it his head gave a faint pound. He groaned, forcing his eyes open more.

"Thanks," Tom said, his voice soft. He'd opened his eyes again and was watching Harry. He leant over silently and picked the glasses up off the nightstand and handed them over. In doing so, his quilt slipped down his chest, and Harry's eyes feasted on the new skin hungrily.

"Thank you," he said in a hush, shoving his glasses onto his nose and standing up on shaky legs. He padded out of the room, his fingers bunching up into the fabric of the t-shirt he was wearing, a grin spreading across his face. He descended the stairs and got to the kitchen, still

marvelling at the fact he was wearing Tom's clothes. He never wanted to take them off, never wanted to give them back, and his mind was desperately trying to come up with a scenario in which it wouldn't be weird to keep them.

He grabbed an ice cold bottle of water from the small fridge and chugged some down, relieving his throat and mouth from the post-alcohol dehydration he was prone to.

Climbing back up the stairs, he had to fight Tom's boxers into staying up while they struggled to slip down his arse. It was humiliating but also kind of hot, a reminder of whose underwear he was wearing.

"Oh brilliant," Tom said when Harry reemerged into his room. He took the bottle gratefully, drinking it down. Harry watched his throat bob as he swallowed, slumping back down into his bed. "Thank you," Tom said with a sigh as he finished drinking, a sheen of water droplets clinging to his upper lip.

"I'm going back to sleep," Harry announced, taking his glasses off and dropping them unceremoniously onto the nightstand between their beds.

Tom hummed. "Me too, despite your assurance of the contrary, I definitely have a hangover."

Harry laughed softly, grinning over at Tom who was giving him a pointed look. "Yeah, me too. But it would've been worse if we hadn't jumped in the lake, believe me."

Tom made an unconvinced sound, shuffling back into bed and pulling the quilt up to his chin. Harry thought it was adorable. He thrust an arm under his pillow, opting to stay facing Tom, happy to have him in his line of sight as he sank back into slumber. "Night," he mumbled, his eyes already drooping.

He saw Tom's faint smile on his relaxed features. He yawned, the sight making Harry's heart beat happily and a small smile stretch across his lips. "Night, Harry." His breathing evened out not long after, having buried his nose under the cover.

Harry watched as long as he could before sleep took hold of him, drifting off into a peaceful slumber.

*

The second time Harry woke up that morning, it was to the lovely sound of the page of a book being turned, and the soft breathing of someone else. Aside from those two sounds, the chapel was silent, made all the more wonderful by the nice December chill in the room, cooling down Harry's burning skin.

He awoke with a smile on his face. He stretched across the bed, pulling his arms tight until they touched the wall behind him, a small noise escaping his throat.

"Morning," Tom said quietly.

Harry opened his eyes, the sight of Tom's small smile making his own deepen. "Morning," he replied, sleep slurring the word. "Did you wake up a long time ago?"

“Half an hour,” Tom answered softly, closing the book and settling it in his lap.

“What time is it?”

“Just past eleven,” Tom said, checking the clock. “We slept another three hours, not bad.”

“Mhm,” Harry hummed, pressing his face into the pillow. “I feel loads better.”

“Me too,” Tom replied, his voice barely above a whisper.

“What are you reading?” Harry asked, turning onto his side, basking in the intimacy of the moment. His bed creaked as he did so, cutting through the silent room.

Tom’s eyes didn’t leave him as he held the book up. “*The Picture of Dorian Gray*.”

“Good book,” Harry said with a smile. He’d read it a couple times, Sirius loved it, he always said that if they ever made a film he’d do everything he could to get the role.

Tom nodded happily. “Coffee?” he proposed.

“Yep,” Harry replied, twisting in the bed until he was sitting up, his feet reaching out to the carpet. “I’ll give you your clothes back later on in the week, after I’ve washed them.”

“No rush,” Tom replied, clearing his throat. “The t-shirt suits you actually,” he added, looking out of the window, a blush coating his cheeks, “more than me anyway, you can keep it.”

Harry was grateful he wasn’t standing. His breath caught, looking down at the t-shirt hanging off his collarbones as if it held any answers for him. “Are you sure?”

Tom nodded, moving in bed until he was facing Harry, his feet planting on the carpet. He grinned, his cheeks still coated in a dusting of pink. “Positive,” he replied before getting up, assaulting Harry with a close-up of his bare chest.

Harry watched him, glued to where he was sitting at the edge of the bed, his hands clinging to the mattress on either side of his thighs. Tom fished a jumper and some joggers out of the wardrobe and pulled them on.

Harry got up off the bed belatedly, realising he’d been staring for too long. He felt his cheeks flush terribly, made worse when he had to pull the boxers up that had started to slip further down his hips with the sudden movement. “Thank you,” he said, “for the t-shirt.”

Tom gave him a bemused sort of smile, his eyes tracking down to where Harry was still clutching at the boxers’ waistband to keep them from falling right back down. He definitely looked amused then. “You’re welcome,” he said with a smile, tilting his head to the side. “Do you want some trousers?” he asked, sounding sincere. “Or a jumper?”

Harry’s mouth moved silently for a few seconds, his heart hammering far too hard for someone who had woken up minutes ago, and his stomach squirming far too uncomfortably for the amount of alcohol he’d consumed hours ago. “Maybe a jumper,” he replied

tentatively, his voice small in his sudden shyness, “but I should get some of my own trousers, yours would just fall off,” he added with a small laugh, his cheeks burning.

Tom smiled, his eyes warm as they regarded him, making him feel very hot. “You might be right. Take your pick then,” he said, taking a small step back and gesturing to the wardrobe.

Harry’s breath stuttered again, though he tried to seem normal. Because he was. He was so normal about getting to pick out one of Tom’s jumpers to wear. So, *so* normal, and not at all head over heels.

He stepped up into Tom’s space and faced the wardrobe, having to drop his hold on the waistband of the boxers, dismayed to feel them slip right back down to their position of hanging precariously low on his hips. Thankfully, the t-shirt was long enough to hide any incriminating almost-nudeness.

He scanned the wardrobe, trying not to shiver while standing so close to Tom again. There was a grey hoodie that Tom rarely wore, though he looked exceptionally good when he did, and so Harry picked that one, unfolding it gently. He turned to Tom and grinned up at him, pushing his glasses back up. “Is this one okay?”

Tom watched him for a second, and Harry, insanely, thought that they might kiss. “Perfect,” he said with a smile, closing the wardrobe and stepping away from him.

Harry stepped back as well, covering his face of whatever it was doing by tugging the jumper over his head. The inside was so *soft*, caressing every inch of skin it could get to, while the hood messed up his hair, deep enough to cover a part of his forehead. It smelt so much of Tom that Harry had to actively fight the urge to inhale deeply into the fabric.

“Suits you,” Tom said with a smile.

Harry grinned, his chest feeling fluttery. “I’ll go get some trousers on then,” he said, “and then coffee.” He left the bedroom after that, with a surprising pang of regret at having finished sharing the space with Tom. He’d undoubtedly return to his own room that night.

“I’ll go make us some,” Tom said as he headed down the stairs, the sound of his bare feet hitting the wood following him.

Harry smiled at the domesticity, wondering what these holidays would have in store for them. He tugged the first pair of black joggers he found in his wardrobe on, moving to the window to crack it open to chase away the unfamiliar smell of this Sam Alphard had been with. He allowed himself a deep sniff into the collar of the jumper, relishing in the rich scent of Tom coming from the fabric, before following downstairs.

The window that ran along the length of the counter in the kitchen made a stunning backdrop for Tom’s figure as he made their coffee, hair mussed up with remnants of sleep, his jumper bunching up around him, making him look exceptionally soft.

“There you go,” he said as he turned around, handing Harry his coffee with an easy smile.

Harry thanked him, leading them into the library where everyone always drank their morning coffee. They sat in their usual seats, facing one another. “It’s weird,” Harry said, wanting to fill the silence, “it’s so quiet without the others.”

Tom hummed in agreement. “It’s nice though,” he said faintly, taking a sip of his coffee. “I can’t believe they woke us up,” he added with a scowl.

Harry smiled, shaking his head. “Honestly,” he muttered. “How many times did you kick him?”

“Twice,” Tom stated vehemently, “*hard* as well, the wanker.”

Harry laughed. “I kicked him once too. He’s not that good at taking a hint.”

“He’s too nosy,” Tom said, shaking his head. “Although,” he went on, pensively, after a while, “it was a…curious thing to catch us doing.” He was smirking lightly, an oddly guilty look on his face.

Harry laughed again, thinking back to the scene. “It really was,” he agreed. “We’ll never beat the allegations against us if we keep having showers together.”

Tom snorted, his eyes bright with mischief. Harry was blushing, he could feel it in the burn of his cheeks, from the slight implication that they would shower together again in his words. “If there was anything that would get him curious, it was definitely that. I bet he didn’t sleep, the idiot.”

“I’d bet he snuck in at night to see if we were in the same bed, you know,” Harry added with a grin.

“He was probably dreadfully disappointed.”

Harry nodded, his fingernails tapping against the ceramic mug. “You know—” he started, feeling a bit silly for what he was about to say but it was something he’d been worried about for a while— “I kind of wonder if all the shit he goes on about isn’t in part, at least, because he’s a bit sad, maybe jealous, that you and I are friends?” It ended up coming out as more of a question than a statement, but he didn’t mind.

Tom regarded him for a second before he shook his head. “Theo’s not like that,” he said matter-of-factly. “He’s not possessive about friends and he’s not the jealous type either. He really is just that obsessed and strange.”

Harry smiled faintly. “Good,” he said, “because I’d hate it if that were the case.”

“It’s not,” Tom assured, “really, he’s not the possessive type.”

“You know,” Harry said with a self-conscious laugh, “I actually—at the start of the year—I actually thought you and him were, you know,” Tom’s eyes widened in horror and Harry laughed as he said, “together.”

“God no,” Tom replied, looking appalled. “What in the world made you think that?”

Harry shrugged. “You didn’t seem close to anyone else and—remember after Snape’s first lesson? When Theo came to my room after and we shared a joint?” Tom nodded, eyes curious, so Harry went on— “well you seemed a bit, I don’t know, jealous I suppose. I thought maybe you were pissed because me and Theo got on well and so I thought, *maybe he’s jealous*. I asked Alphard though and he laughed at me.”

Tom shook his head in disbelief, though a bit of colour had risen in his cheeks. “I er—well, obviously we’re not together and I’ve never harboured romantic or sexual feelings for Theo, but I was a bit pissed, if I’m being honest.”

“Oh?” Harry said, interested in the conversation and infinitely endeared by how diplomatically Tom was speaking.

Tom nodded, looking a bit uncomfortable. “Clearly you’ve noticed, but I have very few friends. I can be a bit…possessive, I suppose.”

Harry smiled, his chest warming at the thought of Tom being possessive about him. Maybe that was why he’d seemed annoyed with Chris Lestrange. Even Ron and Hermione he’d regarded with a certain amount of coldness. “That’s normal, I think,” Harry said quietly after a while. “When you grow up having everything ripped away from you, or you grow up with nothing, everything you do manage to hold onto, you dig your nails into. And when someone tries to rip it away, you hold on just that bit tighter.”

A look passed over Tom’s face, something like wonder, though it was gone in an instant. “Is it the same for you?”

Harry smiled, something bitter about it. “*Everything I’ve ever let go of has claw marks on it*.”

Tom studied him, unabashed in his scrutiny. Harry didn’t squirm, he felt safe, sat there under Tom’s loaded gaze, wearing his jumper that swamped his smaller frame, drinking the coffee Tom had made him. Eventually, he smiled. “My dynamic with Theo works well,” he stated, “I’m possessive and a tad controlling but he’s very social and doesn’t take me seriously. My negative reactions to some of his actions, born from my own faults, could never affect him, because he does not care.”

Harry smiled, cocking his head to the side, curious to see where Tom’s train of thought was going.

“For us however,” Tom said with a sigh, a small smile playing on his lips, “it could be detrimental. Our personalities clash in that they are complementary.”

“But where we aren’t complementary, we’re opposites,” Harry added on, something secret, private, passing between them.

Tom inclined his head, seemingly happy with Harry’s addition. “I foresee crashing and burning in our friendship,” he declared, taking a sip of his coffee.

Harry laughed, unable to quell his amusement at the lighthearted tone they were employing to speak like they were. “You know how I know we’re a bit fucked in the head?” he asked,

grinning over at Tom.

“How?”

“Because no one takes friendship this seriously,” Harry said with a laugh.

Tom smiled, huffing out a small laugh, looking sheepish. “Perhaps we are a tad dramatic.”

“That’s all you,” Harry teased, tapping his foot under the table.

“Oh?” Tom said, raising an eyebrow. He cleared his throat before saying, in a very mocking voice, “*Everything I’ve ever let go of has claw marks on it*.”

Harry laughed, the sound loud and happy in the silent chapel. He kicked Tom’s ankle gently, his toes lingering on the arch of his foot. “Shut up,” he said, though what he wanted to say was: *tease me more, tease me forever, never stop speaking to me, never take your eyes off me*.

“What do you want to do today?” Tom asked, eyeing him with a small smile that had been plastered to his lips all morning.

Harry hummed in thought. “I’m not sure, we don’t have anything we need to do.”

“Not today, no,” Tom replied, fingers tapping the wooden table. “We’ll have to go shopping though at some point, in the village, the school staff are on holiday too.”

“What about the younger years? Do they not get to eat?” Harry asked with an incredulous laugh.

“Well, they *do*,” Tom said, smiling. “If I’m being honest the food is shit here during the holidays. The staff are on holiday so they hire like a holiday team. There are very few students who don’t go home.”

“Okay then, we should be okay for a couple days though, we’ll go to the shops later in the week,” Harry proposed.

“Alright then,” Tom agreed. “That doesn’t answer my question of what you want to do today though.”

“I don’t know,” Harry said honestly. He was generally useless during the holidays and spent most of his time lying around in bed, reading or drawing or just listening to music.

“I have a couple things I can occupy myself with,” Tom said. “If you’re okay with spending the day in partial silence.”

Harry laughed. “Fine by me,” he replied. “Are you okay with music for whatever it is you want to do?”

“Yes, fine,” Tom said, pushing his chair back and standing up. Harry watched him wander over to the record player that Gaspar had brought along. A few seconds later, a soft piano rang out in the library. “I’m going to get something from my room, do you need anything?”

“I’ll come too,” Harry said. “See what I can get to entertain myself.”

When they were upstairs Harry went into his bedroom, flicking over notebooks and books on his desk. He didn’t fancy reading that much, though he grabbed a book anyway, along with one of his drawing notebooks and a pencil.

He wandered next door when he’d got what he needed, hovering in Tom’s doorway. He walked into the room uninvited, lingering before the desk at the end of the bed he’d slept in. Books were stacked on top of the surface, and he looked through the titles. He could feel Tom’s eyes on him but he didn’t look over. All the books were annotated and Harry smiled, wanting to pick apart all of his annotations.

It was in this, in the paragraphs and words Tom had underlined and commented on that Harry was sure he would find who he was.

“It’s rude to snoop through peoples’ things,” Tom stated with a small smile as he sidled over.

Harry grinned, flicking through a copy of *Macbeth*. “You did the same thing to my stuff yesterday.”

Tom hummed, looking amused. “I did.”

Harry looked around at his leisure, noticing the lack of things rather than their presence. He had no photos, no overtly personal items aside from his books, no trinkets or mementos.

“What’s your favourite book?” Harry asked curiously.

Tom tapped a copy of *The Secret History* that was hidden under a few other books. Harry moved them aside and picked it up; the cover was frayed and folded over in places, the spine worn, drawing deep folds into the title, the pages were yellowed and frazzled. He flicked through it, noticing many markings in pencil, almost on every page.

Harry smiled. “Who’s your favourite character?”

“Henry, of course.”

Harry laughed lightly, setting the book back down. “Of course it’d be Henry.”

“Who’s yours?” Tom asked.

“I quite liked Francis,” Harry said with a smile. “Though I did like Henry too, I fancied him a bit.” Tom laughed, shaking his head. “I thought you didn’t read novels?”

“I do sometimes, but they have to be worth my while,” Tom explained, his fingers hooking around Harry’s wrist, motioning them towards the door. He led them back downstairs, peering at the books Harry had brought. When they were sat down he leant across the table and pulled Harry’s notebook over to himself, flicking through it without preamble.

Harry was quite embarrassed, feeling blood rush to his cheeks.

“You’re very good,” Tom commented, looking over some sketches Harry had done of Ron and Hermione. “What’s this?” he asked, turning the sketchbook to show him.

“One of Sirius’s tattoos,” he explained. “He has it here,” he added, gesturing to the centre of his chest.

Tom hummed, turning another page, looking at each drawing. “Is this Alphard?” he asked, showing Harry a sketch of Alphard lounging on his bed, talking. He’d been telling Harry all about a play they’d done in fifth year and had agreed to Harry drawing him.

“Yeah.”

Tom smiled, pushing the sketchbook back towards him. “Draw me?” he asked, that faint smattering of pink blooming over his cheekbones again.

Harry’s heart stuttered. “I’d love to,” he said, the truth spilling out of him. “I mean, yeah, yes of course, if you want.” He tried not to cringe at his stumbling.

Tom smiled, nodding before opening his own notebook and flicking towards the end of it. Harry took a steady breath, biting at the end of his pencil and opening his sketchbook to a new page. He couldn’t believe he had free rein to stare at and scrutinise Tom’s beautiful face as much as he wanted to.

They were silent, only the soft sound of the piano ringing out from the record player. Harry studied Tom, the way he hunched over his notebook, his left hand wielding the black pen, scratching out words that Harry couldn’t make out. The way his hair fell across his forehead, messy on his head because he hadn’t bothered to style it, the glint of silver from the chain laying in the crook of his neck. The way he nibbled on his lower lip, the angle of his crooked nose, the smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose, the rosy flush across his cheeks, the warm brown of his eyes, the way his eyelashes curled upwards.

He sketched it all out, intent on getting every detail perfect. From the curl of his hair, to the broadness of his shoulders, the veins in his wrists, his long fingers, the folds of his jumper.

“I’m getting hungry,” Tom said after a long while.

Harry blinked, his focused haze having numbed all other sensations. “Me too,” he realised, his stomach clenching around nothing.

“Sandwiches?” Tom proposed. “We can get a takeaway or something tonight.”

“Fine by me,” Harry said happily, closing his notebook.

“Can I not see?” Tom asked, his fingers inching towards the sketchbook.

“Not until it’s finished,” Harry declared with a cheeky grin before leading the way into the kitchen. They made their sandwiches companionably, bumping into each other occasionally. “Do we have any crisps?” he asked, rifling through one of the cabinets.

“There should be some salt and vinegar,” Tom replied, coming up behind Harry. He put a hand on his back as he reached above him, grabbing the packet from the top shelf.

“Boring salt and vinegar,” Harry said, taking the crisps appreciatively anyway.

“They’re my favourite,” Tom stated, giving him a look.

“Well you have boring taste in crisps.”

Tom scoffed. “What’s yours then?”

“Prawn cocktail, of course,” Harry said with a grin.

Tom pulled a face, his nose scrunching up. “Sick.”

“Shut up,” Harry said with a laugh, pinching his arm. They ended up eating in the kitchen, Harry hoisting himself up onto the counter, and Tom leaning against it a bit further down. “What’s your favourite chocolate?”

“What? Like a brand?” Tom asked, popping a crisp into his mouth.

“No in chocolate bars I mean.”

“Oh, I like a Wispa or a flake,” Tom replied, and Harry nodded approvingly. “I quite like those—you know those Aero mint things?”

“Oh, you’re disgusting,” Harry said with a laugh.

Tom pinched his leg in reproach. “What do you like then?”

“I like Wispas and flakes too, but my favourites have always been crunchies—”

“Too sweet,” Tom said, picking at the crumbs on his plate.

“I’ll have a Mars bar too,” Harry added.

“Hm, Mars bars are good. Do you like Snickers?” Tom asked, getting a glass of water.

“No, there’s too much going on in a Snickers, you know what I mean?”

Tom laughed. “I agree,” he said.

They returned to the library once they’d finished eating, Harry running up to his room to grab his coloured pencils first. He rarely coloured in his drawings, liking the black and white aesthetic. It didn’t feel right though, to draw Tom and leave out all the colour about him.

Tom went back to his scribbling and Harry did his best to capture the exact shade of his hair, the exact colour of his eyes. He added the background, drawing in the chapel’s stained glass windows as a backdrop for his figure.

Time wore on, the chapel's light dimming as the sun set early, until they caved and turned the lights on. They swapped the record a number of times, from Chopin to Bach, to Mozart and Debussy. They ordered a pizza to share, Harry paying for it before Tom could even offer. Afterwards, they shared a joint.

"Look at me," Harry said, leaning over the table to get closer to Tom. He'd finished the drawing, all that was missing were the gold flecks of his irises.

Tom looked up, curious. "What are you doing?" he whispered as Harry squinted in his direction, studying his eyes.

"Just trying to get your eyes right," Harry mumbled, not really realising how close they were. He was positively bent over the table on his tiptoes.

"Oh," Tom said faintly, letting Harry scrutinise his eyes for longer than was strictly necessary.

Once he had it, he sat back down and coloured in the specks of gold. There were just two of them, one in each eye, just below his pupil. They were very small but they never failed to catch the light.

"I think I'm finished," Harry announced, rubbing his eyes for a while before lifting his sketchbook up and inspecting the drawing. It was impeccable, the best one he'd ever done. He'd spent so long detailing every inch of Tom's face he could draw it again from memory. He wished he could imbue smell, could include every one of his small smiles, the mischief that sometimes shone in his eyes. It was a tribute to how beautiful he was, how ethereal he was with the stained glass shining on him.

It was a work of love, Harry realised, and the thought shook him enough he felt the rattle in his ribs.

"Show me," Tom said softly, having closed his notebook, waiting eagerly for Harry to show him.

Harry, suddenly nervous, hesitated. He worried Tom would *see*—would see that every line, every stroke of colour, reflected how much of himself he'd poured into it. He shook himself though, and picked the sketchbook up, sliding it over the table before he could change his mind.

He watched as Tom looked, his eyes widening, his cheeks flushing. He swiped his tongue over his bottom lip, his thumb toying with the corner of the page. "Do I always look this good?" he asked, a small laugh accompanying the words.

"Yeah," Harry replied truthfully—too honest, too serious. "I'm only working with what's already there," he added, trying for a teasing tone but ending up somewhere near pathetically reverential.

The flush on Tom's cheeks deepened, and Harry was sure his own was burning on his face and neck. "I—thank you, it's brilliant," he said eventually, his eyes dropping back down to

the drawing.

Harry took a shaky breath, unable to take his eyes off him, wanting to capture his wide-eyed wonderstruck look on paper as well.

— Scene two —

Harry did in fact go back to his own room that night, and all the following nights. He got the feeling that Tom wouldn't mind him sleeping in his room, but he didn't want to seem weird in asking.

He gave Tom his pair of underwear back a couple days later after washing his clothes. He didn't wash the t-shirt *or* the jumper, which Tom had said he could keep for a while if he wanted. Harry had worn it everyday since, and slept cuddled up to it every night.

Despite how intense his infatuation with Tom was, Harry did take Hermione's advice into consideration; *being his friend*. Now that Tom had actually acknowledged their friendship, Harry felt more at ease. It was easier to pass him in the hallway, Harry coming back from a shower and Tom going to have one, easier to share a packet of crisps, to share a joint, easier to knock on Tom's door and wander in, offering to make coffee or dinner for the both of them.

Tom seemed to ease into the concept of friendship with him too. He didn't hesitate to share a paragraph of a book he was reading and ask for Harry's opinion, or serve two glasses of wine, or water, or whiskey—whatever they were drinking. He picked up Harry's things as if they were his own, his smiles and laughs came freely and without censure.

Their conversations no longer held that strain of two people who didn't know where they stood with one another. Now, they were natural and held an easy flow, a back and forthness, whether it be in thoughtful conversation, casual plans, or teasing.

Harry tried not to acknowledge how painfully infatuated he was with him. There was no point in recognising his feelings for what they were, he was at a stage where he valued Tom's friendship too much, where he didn't want to go back to that tiptoeing they'd previously done around each other.

And Tom was still liberal with the amount of physical contact he shared with him, so it didn't really matter.

"Harry, look over the shopping list," Tom called from the kitchen. Harry smiled, tying off his laces before wandering into the kitchen, the hood of Tom's jumper covering his hair. "Have I forgotten anything?"

Checking over the list quickly, he hummed. "We need some more sugar as well," he said, taking the pen from Tom's hand and scribbling it down.

"Oh, yeah," Tom said, already leaving the kitchen.

Harry trailed after him, folding the list and putting it in his trouser pocket. He shrugged his black dyed jean jacket on and waited by the door. "Ready?"

"Let's go," Tom replied, pulling his coat around himself.

They walked out into the cold, the grass coated in a thin sheen of frost. They had a ten minute walk ahead to get to the village.

“I can’t believe we jumped in that lake less than a week ago, in the dead of night,” Tom commented, shaking his head in disbelief.

“It was very brave of us,” Harry said, laughing.

“Stupid more like,” Tom grinned. “By all means, we should be dead.”

Harry snorted, knocking his elbow into Tom’s. “Do you mind if we stop somewhere else before we go to the shop?”

“Where do you need to go?” Tom asked curiously.

“I was thinking now would be a good time to get a reservation at the Italian restaurant,” Harry said while Tom frowned at him, looking confused. “You know, for your birthday.”

Tom stopped short, his frown deepening. “What?”

Harry stopped next to him, tilting his head to the side. “You know, I mentioned going out to eat for your birthday. You said you’d think about it.”

“I said I’d think about getting a takeaway.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, do you want to go to the restaurant? Because now’s the time to say.”

“Harry I—” he cut off, his nose scrunching up in the way it did when he was uncomfortable. “Look, it would be lovely but I can’t—I can’t really afford it.”

“Oh,” Harry said, taken aback as he looked at Tom who was avoiding his eye. “Oh, but Tom I’d be paying. It’s your birthday, obviously I’d be paying.”

“No, I can’t have you paying for me—”

“Tom,” Harry cut in with a laugh, “I do not care. I have more money than I need, please, if you want to go, I’ll happily pay for you. I wouldn’t have accepted you paying even if you were a millionaire and I’d be using the last pounds in my bank account.”

“But—”

“No buts,” Harry said. “Either you want to go or you don’t. And you said it would be lovely so I’m taking that as a yes.”

Tom stared at him, and Harry could tell he wasn’t being polite in his refusal, he merely felt uncomfortable having someone pay for him. “But you already bought the pizza we had the other night,” he said faintly.

Harry laughed. “And I’ll be buying the shopping too, come on.” He held onto Tom’s arm and pulled him forward, getting them moving again.

Tom huffed but he resumed his walk, manoeuvring so Harry's arm slipped under his. "Absolutely not," he said.

"It's non-negotiable," Harry replied easily. "Do you prefer to go to the restaurant at lunch time or in the evening?"

He looked up at Tom who was blinking, his jaw slack as if he were in shock. "I'm really not —"

"Lunchtime or evening?" Harry pressed, tugging lightly on his arm.

"Evening then, Jesus," Tom snapped, so many conflicting emotions flicking across his face, Harry only caught annoyance and awkwardness.

He laughed, grinning up at him. "There we go. What's your favourite dessert?"

"Why do you ask?" Tom said, looking down at him with narrowed eyes.

Harry shrugged. "Just wondering."

Tom sighed, looking somewhat defeated. Harry smiled. "I like apple crisp," he said finally, "with cinnamon in it."

"Oh good pick," Harry said. "I've never had it but it sounds delicious."

"I had it at Theo's over the summer. His sister is a terrific baker," he explained. "It was delicious, like you say."

Harry grinned, seeing the village appear in the distance. They finished the walk to get there, their fingers frozen by the time they did and their noses red. It was a very small village called Hogsmeade, though it had a few inhabitants and a few shops. There was a stationary shop, a small supermarket, and a couple restaurants and take outs.

"Wait here for me? I'll only be a couple minutes," Harry said as they got to the restaurant.

"Be quick," Tom said, taking his arm back.

Harry smiled and walked into the building, going straight up to the counter. "Hi," he said to the hostess who greeted him with a smile, "could I make a reservation for the 31st?"

"'Course," she said cheerily, "can I have a name and a time?"

"For Harry Potter," he said, "two people, around 7.30 in the evening should do."

She marked it down in her book, nodding along as she went. "Perfect then Mr. Potter, can I help you with anything else?"

"Well," Harry said, a grin stretching across his lips, "it'll be my friend's birthday and I was wondering if I could request a dessert? I'll pay extra of course."

“Oh, I’ll have a word with the chef but it shouldn’t be a problem. What would you like?”

“Apple crisp if you can, a recipe with cinnamon in it would be perfect,” Harry replied with a grateful smile.

“Noted,” the woman said happily. “I’ll be working on the 31st so I’ll give you a thumbs up if it’s alright. Do you want us to acknowledge your friend’s birthday at all? Candles or a song?”

Harry laughed lightly, wondering if it was worth Tom’s embarrassment. He ultimately shook his head, imagining that Tom would be uncomfortable enough as it was. “That’s very kind, but he’d hate that I think.”

“Alright then, love,” the woman said, giving him a kind smile. “I’ll see you both on the 31st.”

“Thank you,” Harry said earnestly. “Have a nice day!”

“You too, dear.”

He walked out of the restaurant, a broad grin on his face. Tom immediately regarded him with suspicion but only reached out to grab Harry’s wrist gently, pulling him along. “I’m freezing, you took ages.”

“Just chatting,” Harry replied easily, letting himself be pulled towards the supermarket.

It was a strange experience, being in a supermarket with Tom. He’d accompanied Alphard, Theo, Gaspar, Rick, or Abraxas many times to the shops, getting their usual coffee, sugar, crisps, tea, alcohol, etc. but somehow he’d never ended up with Tom.

It was very domestic, especially since they had quite a lot to get. In some strange way it felt like when he would go to the shops with his mum and dad. He grabbed a few packets of prawn cocktail crisps along with some salt and vinegar. They got all their essentials, as well as some other stuff like Gaspar’s herbal tea that he was running out of, and a couple bottles of wine.

Harry even managed to sneak an assortment of Cadbury’s chocolates and a few bars of Aero’s mint chocolate into the trolley without Tom noticing. He planned to give it to him for Christmas, in lieu of a proper present.

“Are you sure you’re okay paying?” Tom asked, eyeing the sheer amount of shopping they had. “We can do half and half if you want.”

“It’s fine,” Harry said happily, pulling out his bank card and paying whilst Tom packed everything up into shopping bags.

“I need some cigarettes,” Tom said as they got back outside, carrying three bags each.

“Oh, me too,” Harry said, putting the bags down. The shop was right next to the supermarket. “Here,” he said, fishing his card back out of his wallet, “get us five packs each and put it on this. I’ll wait here with the shopping.”

Tom stared at him in disbelief. “Absolutely not, put that away.”

“Come on, it’s freezing,” Harry pressed. “Take the bloody thing, the code is 3110.”

Tom’s mouth moved wordlessly, absolute disbelief written all over his face. “Put your fucking card away,” he snapped.

“Oh my god, Tom,” Harry said, “take my fucking card, I don’t have cash on me and I need some cigarettes.”

“I’m not buying mine with your card.”

Harry sighed. “If you *must*, split it between us. But I’m really fine with you putting everything on my card.”

“Put your card away, I’ll buy yours as well,” Tom said with an eye roll.

“Absolutely not,” Harry said quickly. “*Don’t* buy my stuff, do what you want for yours but my cigs go on my card. I’m not having you pay for me.”

“Oh, and whyever not?” Tom said with a raised eyebrow.

“Because you need the money more than me,” Harry said quietly, hoping he wouldn’t offend Tom. “Look, I’ve got enough money as it is, take the free cigs, Tom.”

“No,” Tom said finally, and he marched off into the shop. Harry stared at him as he went, his card held stupidly in his hand. He wanted to go after him but he couldn’t leave the shopping so he had no choice but to wait.

He came back a few minutes later with ten packs of cigarettes between his hands, and put them into one of the shopping bags. “Come on then,” he said.

“I wish you hadn’t done that,” Harry said, following as Tom set off.

“I don’t understand, you can buy whatever for me, but I can’t spend a single pound on you?” Tom asked incredulously. “I don’t appreciate pity, Harry.”

“It’s not pity,” Harry said quickly. “I genuinely don’t like people paying for me.”

“Oddly enough, neither do I,” Tom said pointedly.

“I understand,” Harry replied, “but I *have* money—”

“I don’t care, Harry,” Tom cut in. “Like you said earlier, you could be a millionaire—which I’m starting to think you are—and it could be the last pounds in my bank account.”

“But you wouldn’t spend your last pounds on *me*, and I don’t want you to.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised at how prideful I can be,” Tom said, and Harry laughed, fondness etching into the sound.

“It’s just—” Harry started, shifting his gaze— “I like spending money on friends. It’s what my parents left me, and I feel like I should spend it on the people I care about.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to whip out your card whenever anything needs to be bought,” Tom said, rolling his eyes. “I don’t have a lot of money but I have enough to tend to my needs, I can spare money on cigarettes, I don’t need you to buy them for me.”

“Yeah, okay, sorry if I overstepped there. *But*, you didn’t need to buy *my* cigs.”

Tom shrugged. “I wanted to,” he replied, looking straight ahead.

“Well, I appreciate it,” Harry said after a while, trying to calm the uncomfortable feeling in his stomach. It felt an awful lot like *unworthiness* and he was beating it down inside himself with a stick. “Don’t take this the wrong way, please, but if you ever need money, or you want a book or an expensive pair of trousers, or whatever in the fuck—just ask me, and I’d be happy to help.”

“What do you expect in return?” Tom asked sceptically.

“Nothing,” Harry said easily. “Like I said, I enjoy spending money on friends. I’ll admit it’s not completely selfless—it makes me feel useful, because that’s the one thing I can give, money. But I don’t expect anything in return.”

“It would be so easy to take advantage of you,” Tom said, shaking his head. “Do you know what an offer like that would lead to in a place like the orphanage? You’d be bled dry, people would *pretend* to be your friend just to get your money.”

“That’s why I only offer something like that to people I trust,” Harry said easily. “Yeah if I’m out with an acquaintance I’ll offer to pay for their meal, but I wouldn’t buy them a house, and I’d never offer to.”

“Are you saying you’d buy me a house?” Tom asked with a laugh.

“If you need one,” Harry replied, “though I’m not sure I’d have a lot of money left after that.”

Tom shook his head in amused disbelief. “Most people just offer a room in their home, or a sofa.”

“Well, of course you could come and live with me if you needed it,” Harry said. “The house was more of a hypothetical.”

Their conversation had carried them all the way back to the chapel, and Harry was thankful to see it because his fingers had gone numb under the weight of the shopping bags. Tom unlocked the door and ushered him inside. Harry kicked it shut behind them and followed into the kitchen before shrugging his jacket off.

“You’re very generous, Harry,” Tom said as he started putting the shopping away, “and I promise I won’t take advantage of that. I also appreciate the generosity, even if it’s hard for me to accept it.”

Harry smiled, putting the shopping away in the fridge. “As long as you don’t kick up a fuss on your birthday.”

Tom passed behind him, pinching his waist as he whispered, “I’ll try not to,” in his ear.

Harry shivered but he was grinning, the flush on his cheeks no longer from the cold.

— Scene three —

It was Christmas Eve, and while Harry had since washed Tom's jumper, he still continued to wear it most days. Everyday he thought, *today he'll ask for it back*, but he never did. He only smiled softly when he spotted Harry wearing it every morning.

The phone rang around eleven in the morning while they were drinking their second coffees and discussing the problems with translations in poetry. They sent each other an odd look but Tom got up and Harry heard his, "Hello," from the hallway.

"Oh, it's you," Tom said and Harry was too curious to stay put, sidling up next to him seconds later. "It's Theo," Tom explained with an eye roll. Harry laughed, shaking his head. "Theo shut up—come closer," he said, turning to Harry with an exasperated look, "he wants you to come closer."

Harry went, leaning up on his tiptoes, his hands on Tom's shoulder, to press his ear next to his.

"*Okay can you both hear me?*" Theo asked.

"Yes," they said simultaneously.

"*Brilliant*," Theo said excitedly. "*Hi Harry by the way—*"

"Hi Theo!"

"*—look, I'll be busy tomorrow so I thought I'd give you a ring today. Go in my room, you'll find a little present on my bed.*" He sounded delighted with this news and Harry couldn't help his grin.

"You go see what he's done," Tom said, his arm having come around Harry's waist at some point.

Harry nodded and ran off up the stairs, opening the door to Theo and Abraxas's room. He'd gone in many times already, so he knew to expect how clean Abraxas's side of the room was, whilst Theo's was a chaotic mess of books and papers strewn everywhere. He hadn't even made his bed.

On it though was a small package with a note attached that read: *For Tom and Harry, have a happy Christmas, love you xx*

Harry smiled, his heart spiking with fondness. He picked it up and left the room, closing the door carefully behind himself.

"Yes we're *fine*—no—yes, we're eating. Who are you? My mother?" Tom was saying, sounding utterly exasperated. Harry knew though that he was happy to speak with Theo, if he weren't he would've hung up.

He got to the bottom of the stairs and showed the package to Tom who took it from his hands. Harry stayed on the bottom step, perching his chin on Tom's shoulder.

"Hi Theo, it's Harry, love you too, thanks for the present."

"*Oh good*!" Theo exclaimed happily. "*I hope you have fun with it!*"

"How are your holidays going?" Harry asked.

"*Well, well,*" Theo replied, his voice staticky through the phone, "*I've got a family dinner tomorrow.*"

"Oh, that'll be fun," Harry said.

"Thanks for the present," Tom added. "What is it?"

"*Haha, you'll have to open it to find out,*" Theo said conspiratorially. "*I've got to go now my darlings, but I'll see you soon.*"

Harry laughed. "Okay, Theo. We'll love you and leave you then, have nice holidays!"

"*You too Harry, bye bye! Bye, Tom!*"

"Goodbye, see you soon," Tom said, rolling his eyes as he put the phone back on the wall. "Must you play into his dramatics?"

Harry snorted, pushing off Tom's shoulder. "It's just a bit of fun, come on, let's see what he's left us then."

Tom wrapped an arm around his waist, leading him into the library again. "Do you want to open it?" he asked, taking his seat.

"Go ahead," Harry replied with a smile. He watched as Tom peeled the festive paper back, revealing a bag of weed. Harry laughed, shaking his head. Theo had really been thorough though, providing rolling paper and a lighter as well.

"There's a note," Tom said with a bemused smile. "*Luna says this is a special strain called Christmas Knockout, let me know how it is!*"

Harry laughed again, taking the bag from Tom and opening it. He took a sniff and promptly pulled his face back, his eyes wide. "Woah," he said, blinking, "this is gonna knock us out, alright."

Tom grinned. "Shall I roll, then?"

Harry watched Tom roll, having done so so many times in the last few days that he could anticipate his every move. When he lit it, the most fragrant smell came from the smoke and Harry found himself sniffing it in.

"Oh shit," Tom said after the first drag, voice stuffy around the smoke, "it's really good."

They passed the joint back and forth, a slow haze settling over Harry's mind as it got smaller. He was exceptionally giggly, made worse by the fact that Tom giggled along with him. When they'd finished it, they ended up in a conversation about a film that neither of them could quite remember the title of. Despite their lack of knowledge on the subject, they both had a lot to say.

By the time they realised they were both talking about completely different films, thus explaining their vast differences in opinion, the munchies had kicked in. And so, they stood in the kitchen, giggling stupidly, and eating random things from the fridge and cupboards.

Being astronomically high was a very vulnerable position to be in. Harry had only experienced it with Ron, to this degree at least, and the other boys on occasion. But, at that moment, Harry wouldn't have wanted to be with anyone else. Especially if he got to see Tom scarf down a packet of prawn cocktail crisps.

"I thought you didn't like them," Harry said with a giggle, having ended up leaning on the counter in Tom's space.

"Honestly? Right now they're the best thing I've ever tasted," Tom said with a grin, and Harry would never let him forget he'd said that.

When they'd satiated their hunger, by consuming ingredients only, they went back to the library and made the brilliant decision of rolling another joint.

Harry rolled this time around, and the haze in his mind that had started to recede came back in full force, making his eyelids feel heavy. Once the joint was finished they were both silent, Harry's eyes drooping, the chair digging into his back uncomfortably.

"I'm tired," he mumbled, his words slurred with how heavy his tongue felt.

"Me too," Tom replied, his head resting in his hand.

"Shall we have a nap?" Harry proposed, already standing up, though he only made it a couple steps before sprawling onto one of the loveseats in the room.

"Move up," Tom said a couple seconds later, pushing at his shoulders—at least Harry thought it was only a couple of seconds, he'd closed his eyes and between one moment and the next Tom had appeared at his side.

He did as told, sitting up against the cushions. He watched dazedly as Tom sat beside him, shuffling down until he was comfortable against the armrest.

"Come here," Tom said, opening his arms. His eyes were heavy lidded and red-rimmed.

There was a second where Harry felt more lucid, where he wondered what on earth was happening, but it was quickly eclipsed by his muddled mind and his desperate want to bury himself in Tom's arms. He crawled up until he was lying on him, his nose pressed into his neck, their chests squashed together, and their legs tangled up. Tom wrapped his arms around Harry's waist and back, while Harry wrapped his around Tom's neck.

He felt *so* safe, his head buried deep in the hood of Tom's jumper while his face pressed against his neck, Tom's strong arms wrapped around his torso, their bodies touching from head to toe. There was a sort of buzz in his ears and a warmness under his skin that made the embrace feel distinctly home-like.

"Hold me tighter," Harry mumbled, already half unconscious.

"Tighter?" Tom murmured, the syllables merging together. "I thought you were claustrophobic."

"I like it," Harry managed to say through the heaviness in his body. "Feels—nice."

Tom's arms held tighter, and squeezed, and Harry sighed contentedly, breathing in the warm skin of Tom's neck. His nose was squashed against the skin, his lips grazing it. He listened to Tom's breathing, felt the rise and fall of his chest under him, his beating heart that echoed through Harry's chest.

He fell asleep seconds later, having never felt so absolutely *comfortable* before.

*

He woke up sluggishly to the feel of fingertips trailing along the skin of his back and soft breathing against his ear.

His heart rate started to kick up as he realised in what position he was, in whose arms he was nestled, but he did his best to calm it down, to not tense and to not panic. He forced his muscles into that same calm state he'd been in and took a deep breath, his lips catching on the skin of Tom's neck.

"Are you awake?" Tom whispered.

Harry hummed, shifting against Tom, stretching his shoulders that had begun to ache. "Am I squashing you?" he mumbled, voice rough with sleep.

Tom's hand on his back settled on his skin, holding itself there. "No," he whispered back, "I was just waiting for you to wake up, we've been out for hours."

"Really?" Harry asked, frowning. "What time is it?" He knew he should move, get up and away from Tom's body, laugh it off as a high induced cuddle. But he couldn't bring himself to, not when he still felt all warm and fuzzy.

"Four," Tom replied, both of his hands slipping under Harry's jumper and t-shirt, skirting along the burning skin. "God you run hot when you're asleep."

Harry laughed softly into his throat. "Am I keeping you too hot?"

"No it's nice," Tom whispered, holding him just that bit tighter, "I'm always cold."

Harry smiled, liking that they balanced each other out. What he liked a bit less though was the realisation that the entirety of their bodies were pressed together, and, being sprawled

between Tom's legs, that was definitely his cock that Harry could feel pressing into his stomach. He had to bite back a groan at the feel of it, not hard but semi-hard, which, considering they'd just woken up, was normal. Harry was in the same state, his hips pressed against Tom's thigh. He could only pray that his cock wouldn't twitch in arousal.

"That weed really knocked me out—"

There was a knock on the door, shutting Harry up instantly and stilling the motion of Tom's hand on his skin.

Harry lifted himself up slowly, his eyes latching onto Tom's, taking a second to appreciate how pretty he was when sleepy. He wished he hadn't missed the lazy smile that had been replaced with a frown.

"Who the fuck is that?" Harry whispered.

"I don't know," Tom whispered back, his hands having slipped down to the low dip of Harry's waist, his little finger just shy of going into his waistband. "Get up and we'll see."

Harry did as told, letting his hands trail slowly down Tom's body as he went, his eyes lingering on the imprint of his cock through his trousers. He looked away quickly though when he was tempted to lick his lips—perhaps drop to his knees—his cheeks heating up in a blush. He went over to the door, just as the knock sounded again, and peaked through the stained glass.

He froze, his back straightening out. "It's Dumbledore!" he mouthed in Tom's direction, whose face immediately crumbled.

Tom pointed at the ashtray and the weed sprawled out on the table before running off into the kitchen, supposedly to hide it, while Harry did his best to appear awake. He reached out for the doorknob with great reluctance, and opened the door, revealing their Professor on the other side.

"Hi, Professor," Harry greeted, opening the door wider. "Please, come in. Sorry, we've just woken up from a nap."

Dumbledore smiled at him, his eyes twinkling as he stepped through the threshold. He was wearing some kind of thick colourful cloak that covered his whole body, and Harry didn't know if it was because he was still a bit high, but for a second he thought his Professor might have been a wizard. "Hello, Harry, how are you? And it is no issue, you do right, you are on holiday after all."

"I'm well sir, and yourself?" Harry replied, shutting the door to lock out the freezing air.

"Oh, as well as can be," Dumbledore said with a smile.

"Professor," Tom said as he appeared in the library, "hello."

"Hello, Tom. Harry here informs me you have just indulged in a well deserved nap."

“Er—yes,” Tom said, blinking slowly. Harry could see how red his eyes were from the distance he was at. Even though the nap had done them some good, Harry could still feel the lazy haze of the lingering weed. The smell must have been overwhelming and he felt a stab of guilt about it.

“Would you like some tea?” Harry asked politely, going to stand by the kitchen doorway next to Tom.

“Oh that would be divine, Harry,” Dumbledore said, looking around the library curiously, hands clasped behind his back.

“Have a seat, Professor,” Tom said, gesturing to the table as he sat down himself.

“Would you like Earl Gray or—we have this herbal tea that Gaspar likes,” Harry said, feeling supremely awkward. He couldn’t believe not two minutes ago he’d been in Tom’s arms.

“Oh, herbal sounds lovely, with a drop of honey if you have it,” Dumbledore replied, eyes twinkling as he sat in Harry’s usual seat.

“Perfect,” Harry said. “Tom? Tea, coffee?”

“Tea please,” Tom said with a smile. “Just normal.”

Harry nodded, returning his smile before leaving them. He made the tea methodically, pulling his hood down in the process and rubbing at his eyes. He let it steep for a couple of minutes before adding two sugars and some milk in his own, one sugar in Tom’s, and a drop of honey in Dumbledore’s.

He took a steady breath before picking the cups up and trailing back into the library, setting them down on the table. He sat down next to Tom instead of across from him.

“Thank you,” Dumbledore said kindly, blowing on his tea.

“Thanks,” Tom said with a quick smile, cradling the cup between his hands.

“I was just telling Tom that I popped by to see how you were doing, as we haven’t seen you since the holidays began,” Dumbledore explained.

“Oh, right, yeah, we tend to eat in,” Harry said, hoping it wasn’t rude of them to not attend meals.

“As you should,” Dumbledore said, “it is far too cold to be traipsing across the grounds everyday.”

“Is it not too cold in the castle?” Tom asked.

“It comes and goes,” Dumbledore replied airily. “I also came around, boys, because I thought I owed you a word after your performance of *Hamlet*.” His eyes were bright as he mentioned it and Harry straightened out a bit more. “We were beyond impressed, I must admit. While

we had the unfortunate lack of surprise, having witnessed the majority of your rehearsals, we heard many impressions from first time attendees, and they adored what you did."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said, feeling his cheeks flush.

"I'm glad it was up to your standards," Tom said, his leg shifting under the table until it knocked into Harry's.

"You can be very proud of yourselves," Dumbledore insisted. "I must admit, it is the performance I have most enjoyed in recent years."

Harry didn't think that that was a very ethical thing for him to admit to, but he smiled anyway, feeling pride swell in his chest.

"I cannot wait to see what you will have in store for us at the end of the year," he added, glancing between them. "I have a feeling it will be great, and something to remember."

"I do hope so, Professor," Tom said, his cheekbones still red with the warmth of sleep. "We strive for excellence."

"As you have proved time and time again, my dear Tom." Dumbledore's eyes flicked between them, a curious glint in his eyes. "I also wished to extend an invitation to tomorrow's Christmas dinner."

"Oh," Harry said, looking at Tom beside him, "we'd love to."

"It's always nice," Tom said with a quick smile.

"Fantastic!" Dumbledore said brightly. "And what have you boys been doing to occupy yourselves?"

He stayed with them for just shy of an hour, time in which Harry and Tom managed to both sober up and wake up properly. They spoke more in depth about *Hamlet*, Dumbledore inquiring as to the proposals they'd been presented with during the party, and chatting about the younger years' productions scattered throughout the year.

When it came time to bid each other farewell and close the door behind his teacher, Harry had lost all the remaining warmth of his extended cuddle with Tom. A chill had replaced it, that not even Tom's jumper could warm up.

"God—"

Harry turned at Tom's mumble to see him with his head buried in his hands, his fingers rubbing at his eyes, a blush high on his cheekbones, and a hysterical smile on his face. "What's wrong?" Harry asked, feeling an identically hysterical laugh bubbling up.

"He knew," Tom said, looking up at Harry through his fingers. "When you went to make the tea, he said, '*what an odd fragrance, I understand now the nature of your nap*'."

“Well of course he fucking knew!” Harry exclaimed, his laugh breaking free. “It definitely stinks of weed in here.”

“Thank God it wasn’t McGonagall,” Tom said, rubbing his left eye. “She’d’ve had us running laps around the lake.”

“God, yeah,” Harry said, sitting back down next to Tom, feeling exhausted. The proximity and the silence forced Harry into thinking about the nap. He dropped his forehead onto the table, if only to hide his blush.

It had been such an easy thing, to fall into Tom’s arms and fall asleep there. And it was *lovely*. He’d felt so warm, and so safe, and so *comfortable*. He was embarrassed—at how much he’d enjoyed it, at the fact it had happened at all. But he couldn’t dismiss the fact that it had been on Tom’s initiative, that he’d woken up to Tom’s fingers on his skin.

And anyway, what was the harm in a bit of cuddling between friends? They were completely alone for Christmas, for God’s sake. They could have a cuddle.

Harry sighed, letting his lethargic body take itself over to Tom, depositing his head on his shoulder. “Do you like Dumbledore?” he asked, inching his seat closer as Tom wrapped an arm around his waist and dropped his head into his hair. “I can never tell.”

Tom chuckled lightly, his nose rubbing against the crown of Harry’s head. “I do and I don’t. I think we respect each other. He’s an old fool, but he’s not mean.”

“I think he likes you,” Harry said, a yawn tearing through him. Bit by bit, he was warming back up.

“Respect,” Tom said again. “He sees my potential and respects my talent and hard work. He’s seen how mean I can be though, and he doesn’t like it.”

“Oh?” Harry said. “Did he catch you sabotaging?”

“No,” Tom said with a small laugh, “no one ever outright caught me, but he strongly suspected.”

Harry snorted into his shoulder. “I see then. I think I understand your relationship a bit better.”

“I’m still his favourite though,” Tom teased.

“Are you sure?” Harry asked with a grin. “I think he quite favours me.”

Tom gasped dramatically, as if betrayed, but the tightening of his arm around Harry’s waist, pulling him closer, counterbalanced the sound. “I knew you’d be my main competition.”

“Does that mean you’re going to sabotage me next?” Harry asked, amused, and *so* warm. His eyes had slipped shut at some point, his glasses pressing into his nose uncomfortably.

“I might,” Tom said, though Harry doubted it. His glasses were lifted off his nose and Harry heard them being placed on the table. He hummed gratefully. “Are you tired?”

“Shattered,” Harry replied. “That weed really killed me.”

There was a hand in his hair, scratching lightly, and Harry had to actively stifle a moan. “You’re going to fall asleep there,” Tom murmured. “Why don’t we go to the sofa? You can sleep and I can read.”

“Yes please,” Harry said with a dopey smile that he tried his best to keep to himself. Tom offered himself so freely, offered affection and intimacy, and Harry dug his claws into it like a starving wild animal. For as long as Tom offered, he’d never pass up on the opportunity. He couldn’t afford to.

The hand in his hair scratched through it again before leaving. Harry took it as his cue and stood up, stretching up until his back popped. Tom smiled, his fingers finding the stretch of skin on his waist that had been exposed. “I’ll go get a book and some cigarettes, I’ll be back in a minute.”

Harry meandered over to the sofa in Tom’s absence, crashing down onto the cushions, feeling his exhaustion in his bones. He knew it was the weed’s doing, but it was also in part due to the cuddles with Tom, the press of a beating heart against his, that had settled something into his skin, into his bones. It was warm and calming, making Harry’s eyes feel heavy and his heart feel sluggish.

Tom came back with a book, a pack of cigarettes, an ashtray, and a glass of water. He set everything on the floor beside the sofa before sitting down. Harry watched him prop cushions against the armrest before settling there himself, his knees bent to not knock into Harry.

“Come here,” he said, spreading his legs.

The sight was enticing, stirring something deep in Harry that said: *yes, I’ll come between your legs*. He crawled over anyway, ready to drop down onto Tom’s chest, the same position he’d been in earlier though he’d be more upright, with Tom sitting up instead of laying down. But Tom stopped him.

“No, turn around,” he said, gesturing for Harry to do just that.

He did so, sitting on the sofa between Tom’s legs and shuffling back until they were pressed flush and he could lay back, his back on Tom’s stomach, his head on his chest.

“Good,” Tom said softly, pulling his leg up and wrapping it over Harry’s thighs, caging him in. He leant over and grabbed his book and cigarettes. Setting the book in one hand against Harry’s chest, the cigarette in his other, dangling off the sofa, he said, “You comfy?”

Harry hummed, nodding. Everything felt muted in that moment, like all he had to do was lay there, his mind blank and content, surrounded by the warm orange light of the library.

Tom pressed his nose into Harry's hair before flicking the book open and lighting his cigarette. Harry's eyes fluttered shut when he realised the blur in them was too great to make out any words in front of him. The smoke curled into the air, the smell so familiar it didn't make his nose sting like it used to.

He turned his head a bit, until part of his ear was pressed to Tom's chest, the beating of his heart loud and regular. It lulled Harry into a peaceful state of almost-sleep, with the only other sound being the pages turning.

He knew when Tom had finished his cigarette because his hand found its way into Harry's hair, scratching gently down to his neck. He did that for a while, Harry falling in and out of light sleep, until his arm wrapped more securely around his chest, holding him tight.

With both Tom's arm and leg wrapped around him, Harry latched onto his wrist, his other hand finding Tom's thigh. He fell asleep like that, into a deep and dreamless sleep. His last lucid thought had been about how safe and warm he felt.

— Scene four —

Harry woke up feeling disoriented. He was uncomfortably warm, and something was definitely kind of choking him. His mouth was dry, and his stomach empty.

He twisted as best he could, trying to understand where he was. He'd had one of those sleeps where he felt like he'd fallen so far into his consciousness that he was still crawling out of it, the imprints of sheets having carved themselves into his skin.

He blinked his eyes open, it was still dark out. And the thing trying valiantly to strangle him was Tom's jumper and t-shirt, which were half on his body and half off. He'd obviously gotten too hot in the night and tried to take them off.

Falling asleep to a strong arm around his chest, a leg draped across his thighs. Fingers in his hair, the sound of paper turning over, the heartbeat under his ear.

Harry sat up quickly, blinking with renewed interest in his surroundings. He wasn't in the library, he wasn't on the sofa, and he certainly wasn't on Tom. He huffed, frustrated at the clothes clinging to him and pulled them off, leaving him shirtless. The cold air was lovely, and he started to get his mind back.

Initially, he believed he was in his own room, but a glance at the bed beside him told him otherwise.

He was back in Tom's room.

A surprised smile bloomed across Harry's face at the realisation. He sat himself up further, pulling his trousers up as he did. Quite embarrassingly, he'd obviously tried to push them off in his heat induced frenzy, effectively pushing his boxers halfway down his arse. He could only be thankful Tom was sound asleep, the quilt pulled halfway up his chest, leaving his strong arms and toned chest on display.

Harry rubbed his eyes, basking in the first moments of the day. His fluttering heart came to a halt though, knocking the breath out of him as he realised that Tom had carried him to bed.

He'd let Harry fall asleep on him, carried him up to bed, up to *his* room.

His breath caught in his throat, tears pricking at his eyes so suddenly he felt like he had whiplash. It was such an overwhelming tidal wave of emotion that Harry felt choked up on it. A memory flashed at the forefront of his mind.

He'd fallen asleep in the car, but, as if by magic, the turn that brought them back home woke him up, like it always did. But Harry didn't open his eyes, because he knew what he got when he stayed asleep.
And, no sooner had he decided to pretend to be asleep, he felt strong arms wrap around him, unclicking his seatbelt and unwinding it from his body. He was scooped up, face pressed into a warm and familiar chest.
His dad's hands cradled his back, holding him up. A kiss was pressed into his hair, before his

dad whispered, "Isn't he so precious?"
He felt his mum's hand on his cheek, stroking down gently. She murmured a quiet, "Baby," before he was carried off into the warm house. His dad settled him so gently into bed, prying his shoes and jumper off, considerate of how hot Harry got in the night. He was tucked in, a kiss placed on his temple with the murmur of, "Goodnight darling," and a large and rough hand stroking his cheek.
Harry had never felt so safe.

He blinked, a tear slipping down his cheek as his heart beat up a storm in his chest. After that first one, the tears fell freely and silently, dripping onto his cheeks like a leaky faucet, his eyes trained on the figure across the room from him.

Tenderness. Being carried to bed was such a tender gesture, Harry had always thought of it as *loving*, perhaps that was just because he associated it with his dad.

No one else had ever carried him to bed. Not until now.

He knocked his head back into the wall behind him gently, squeezing his eyes shut and pretending, just *pretending*, for a second, that his dad was in the next room over. That if he listened hard enough he'd hear his snores. Hear his mum's soft breathing.

All he heard was Tom's breathing and his own heartbeat. It was enough.

In that moment, it was enough. Because while his dad hadn't carried him to bed in ten years, and never would again, someone else had done it. Someone else had picked Harry up, carried him—perhaps not with love, but *tenderness*—up to bed, gently enough to not wake him. Tom had kept him close, in his own room.

And it was enough. Enough to fill Harry's heart with affection.

Harry had never not opened his heart. He'd suffered for it, through heartache and heartbreak, but he'd never not given love a chance. And Tom was definitely worth the heartbreak.

He took a few deep breaths, feeling his eyes stop leaking. When his heart was back to a normal rhythm, and his breathing evened out, he cracked his eyes open again and glanced at the digital clock. It was just past five in the morning, and Harry was sure he'd slept for twelve hours.

He knew he wouldn't be getting back to sleep, so he took in the room in the moonlight. He smiled as he saw his glasses, sketchbook, and pencil on the nightstand. There was also a glass of water that he took appreciatively, drinking great gulps down.

His eyes drifted back to Tom as he set the glass back down, a small smile gracing his features. He didn't want to leave—didn't want to go to his own room or down to the library. He took a chance and clicked the lamp on, a very warm orange glow lighting up that side of the room.

Tom didn't stir. He was almost on his stomach, one arm shoved under the pillow, the quilt slipping down his back. His face was pressed into the pillow, his hair artfully splayed against

it like a halo, his nose was squished, his lips full and parted. His eyes were shut. He looked peaceful, not a frown in sight, his muscles slack with sleep.

Unthinkingly, Harry grabbed his sketchbook and pencil. He was a piece of art and he itched to capture every part of him on paper.

He shifted until he was properly seated against the wall, facing Tom. He pushed the quilt off his body, folding his legs under himself, and pulled Tom's jumper back next to him, feeling bad for discarding it so thoroughly, even if it had tried to kill him. He was still shirtless, and the chill in the air felt nice on his bare skin.

He started drawing, tracing every line with the utmost care. He'd never drawn someone while they slept, and he hoped Tom's consent for being drawn went beyond the initial sketch. Harry wasn't sure he'd be showing him this one anyway—might keep it for his own viewing pleasure.

Time ticked by, though Harry didn't feel it pass. The sun started to rise, clearly planning a sunny but frosty Christmas day.

Harry drew with care, watching as each line formed into the expanse of Tom's skin, capturing his sleepy expression—how soft, how angelic, how *divine* he looked. Every line was laced with love, every detail etched with the utmost care.

Because of course Harry loved Tom; how could he not?

Whether he was *in love*, or not, was something he was not prepared to tackle. But he would acknowledge this: he loved Tom. He loved him dearly, was enamoured by him, infatuated by everything about him. He loved him like a friend, like a devoted companion, like a boyfriend —*like a lover*.

Harry had always been so giving with love, had always had love to give, though he didn't always receive any in exchange. He didn't mind—loving was easy, the easiest thing in the world. When someone was worthy of love, it was easy to love them, like slipping into a warm bath.

Loving Tom was intense, yes, but it was also easy. Like every one of their tender moments, it was warm, gentle, natural.

It felt like home.

Harry took a staggering breath as the thought rang out in his mind, the pencil stuttering in its movement. The concept of home had been so vague, so incomplete and lost, since he'd lost his parents. Everyday he yearned to go home, though he wasn't sure where that was. There was a word for what he felt, one he'd searched and searched for, needing to pinpoint what the hole in his chest was; *hiraeth*, the desperate longing for a home that one cannot return to, or that never existed.

Sirius's house was home, Ron and Hermione's smiles were home. Tom's arms were home.

With that thought, Harry reached over and grabbed his coloured pencils that Tom had also brought up. He basked Tom in the golden light of the lamp, colouring the page to make it look like some kind of divine lustre.

It felt like devotion, like worship as he did so, meticulously painting Tom onto the page, in all his divine glow. Harry wondered if this was how Michaelangelo felt sculpting David, how the Greeks felt depicting their Gods and Heroes.

Art, after all, had almost always been a celebration of beauty. A wish to conserve it, to keep a small smidgen of it, a feather from an Angel's wing.

"Why's the lamp on?" Tom mumbled sleepily.

Harry snapped back into awareness, the sun having long risen, the clock showing it was almost nine o'clock. With Tom waking up, Harry realised just how weird it could seem that he'd been drawing him in his sleep.

"I woke up early," he whispered, trying not to sound guilty, while continuing to watch Tom. He stretched out, pressing his face into the pillow.

"What're you drawing?" he asked, words still thick with sleep. Harry blanched, and when he remained silent, unsure of what to say, Tom went on to say, "I could hear your pencil scratching." He turned back onto his side, his eyes opening and falling onto Harry, flicking down his chest briefly. His eyes were glazed with sleep, and Harry felt so much love inside him, he was surprised his chest wasn't glowing bright with it, surprised Tom couldn't taste it in the air.

"You," he replied in a whisper.

Tom smiled lazily, the sight so very enchanting, and reached a hand out. "Show me."

Harry handed the sketchbook over mechanically. He didn't even glance back down at it, uneventful and uninspiring when the original piece was in front of his eyes.

Tom rubbed at his eyes and shuffled until he was somewhat sat against the headboard. He looked down at the drawing, eyes widening just a tad and a blush coating his cheekbones. "Wow, I look good."

Breathtaking, more like, Harry thought. He didn't say anything though, just smiled shyly, already knowing his cheeks were burning, the flush spreading all down his exposed chest. "Did you carry me up to bed?" he asked eventually, voice quiet.

Tom stopped inspecting the drawing, eyes flicking up to meet Harry's. "Yes," he replied, just as quiet. "I hope you don't mind. I know you get hot when you sleep but I didn't want to wake you up trying to pull your jumper off."

Harry's heart swelled, the exterior pressing against his ribcage, threatening to burst. *Your jumper*. "Thank you," he murmured, "it was very nice of you." He wondered how he'd looked, cradled in Tom's arms, held tight and gentle.

They didn't mention the fact that Tom had brought Harry to *his* room.

"It was no problem," Tom said with a smile, laying back down in bed. "You're light as a feather."

Harry smiled, his heart blooming with something he couldn't quite identify. "Happy Christmas, by the way."

"Oh yeah," Tom said, turning back to him with a grin, "happy Christmas, Harry."

"I have something for you," Harry said, taking the sketchbook back and setting it on the nightstand.

"What? A present?" Tom asked, surprise written all over his face before a blush took over. "I don't have anything for you."

Harry shrugged. "It's not much," he said with a laugh. "Come on, I can make some Christmas hot chocolate too, you'll love it."

He pulled the jumper back on, though he'd gotten quite used to the cold, beckoning for Tom to follow. He didn't necessarily keep his eyes to himself as Tom got out of bed, his boxers hanging on his hips, uncovering his long legs and the delicious looking plane of his stomach, the stretch of his back.

"What's Christmas hot chocolate?" Tom asked, looking sceptical as he finished pulling his own jumper over his head.

"You'll have to see," Harry said with a wink before trailing out of the room. He'd left all his things behind, hoping that maybe, *maybe*, Tom would be okay with him staying in his room for the rest of the holidays.

"Can I still have some coffee?" Tom asked once they were in the kitchen, and Harry found it so *endearing* that he was asking. It was clear, from Tom's uncertain tone and slightly tense form, that he wasn't familiar with any Christmas traditions, and therefore didn't know how to tread. He wasn't in control of the situation, but that was alright, Harry would take care of him.

"'Course," Harry said with a grin, putting the kettle on. "I'll make the hot chocolate while we drink our coffee."

Tom watched him, taking the coffee appreciatively once it was done and lighting a cigarette. Harry did the same, rummaging through the cabinets for all the ingredients.

"What is it you had for me then?" Tom asked eventually, a forced casualness to him that made Harry smile.

"I didn't wrap it or anything," Harry said with a grin. He left the stove for a second and reached on top of the fridge, grabbing the shopping bag there. "Here," he said, holding it out to him.

He took it, looking like he wasn't sure what to do. Harry went back to the stove, only mildly nervous.

"Oh," Tom said, sounding surprised. Harry turned to him, smiling. "You got all my favourites." His smile was both shy and delighted, the dimple in his left cheek making an appearance. There was a faint smattering of pink dusting across his cheekbones and neck. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Harry said brightly, adding some sugar and cinnamon to the milk.

"When did you get all this? We've been together everyday," Tom said, sounding somewhere between bemused and suspicious.

Harry twisted to look at him as he stirred. "When we went shopping," he said with a grin, "you didn't see a thing."

Tom frowned, rooting through the bag. "But there's so much, how did I not notice this?"

Harry shrugged. "Just weren't paying attention."

It was quiet for a while, just the sounds of Harry stirring the hot chocolate and Tom rooting around in the shopping bag resounding in the kitchen. He watched out of the window along the counter, catching sight of a small deer on the outskirts of the forest. He smiled.

Tom's hands landed on his shoulders, digging in gently, and Harry leant back into him minutely. "Thank you," Tom repeated, his voice so sincere it made Harry wish he'd given him something better than chocolates. "I feel bad about not getting your anything now. Friendships are such a scam," he teased.

Harry tilted his chin back to look up at him, laughing. "I don't care, I don't expect anything."

"I was under the impression that people offered things in the hopes to get something in return," Tom said, his hands having migrated downwards until he could wrap his arms around Harry's chest, holding him tight against himself.

The pressure constricted Harry's ribcage, making his breaths more shallow, but he adored it, adored feeling held. "No," he said, adding a bit more chocolate to the pan.

"You seem to like this jumper," Tom commented lightly, and Harry tried to fight down the blush spreading across his face. "Keep it. As a Christmas present."

Harry's breath caught, his hand coming up to hold onto Tom's wrist, as if to steady himself. "No, it's yours. You don't have to give me anything, you already gave me the t-shirt."

"I wasn't going to ask for it back, anyway," Tom said, holding Harry just a bit tighter. "So now I'm officially saying you can keep it, it's yours."

"But—"

"I might steal it sometimes," Tom went on, ignoring him. "I'm sure you won't mind."

“I might,” Harry said quietly after a bout of silence, in which he managed to calm down his hammering heart and flaming cheeks. “It’s mine.” He took a deep breath, trying to shake the urge to turn around and yank Tom down for a kiss. “Great present, it’s not even new,” he teased, pinching Tom’s wrist gently.

Tom laughed, his arms tightening around Harry until he squirmed. His laugh was so pretty, so deep, pressed right up to Harry’s back, ringing through his ribcage. “Wanker,” he mumbled, sounding amused, before letting go.

Harry felt a kiss being pressed into his hair, before Tom was moving to the side, a dopey smile on his face. He looked so *happy*, no mask drawn over his features, no character etched onto his face, no lines coming from his mouth. He was just Tom, the marble of his features having given way to a real person.

“How’s the hot chocolate coming along then?” he asked, peering into the pan, and sniffing. “God it smells good, did you put cinnamon in it?” His eyes were so bright, the gold shining in the morning light.

“You like cinnamon, don’t you?” Harry asked, though he already knew the answer. Tom nodded, inhaling over the pan again. “It’s finished, would you like some?”

“I’d love some,” Tom said with a bright smile, tapping on the counter before going to grab some mugs.

As he filled them up, Harry said, “It can be a bit sickly, but it’s Christmas so we’re allowed the extra calories. And also it’s hot.”

Tom nodded and took a small sip, his eyes slipping shut. He made a small sound that went straight to Harry’s abdomen, making it feel tight. “That’s delicious. What’s in it?”

Harry smiled. “Chocolate, milk, sugar, vanilla, and cinnamon.”

“Where did you learn to make this? As a matter of fact, where did you learn to cook? You’re very good,” Tom said, his eyes intent on Harry.

“Er—this is something my dad made on Christmas, something he’d learnt from his mum. He would put a lot more spices in it though, it’s just that we don’t have any other than cinnamon,” Harry explained, thinking back to how lovely the kitchen smelled every Christmas morning.

“You’ll have to make me the real one one day,” Tom said with a soft look, “next Christmas, maybe.”

Harry busied himself with taking a sip. “Maybe,” he said with a cheeky grin.

“What about the other stuff?” Tom asked curiously. “That casserole you made the other day was really good, where did you learn that?”

“Oh,” Harry said faintly, waving a hand in the air. “I er—I just had to cook a lot, at my relatives’ house. So, I just learnt over the years.”

“You cooked for them?” Tom asked with a frown. “I’d kind of assumed you were—malnourished there?” he added tentatively.

“Oh, yeah. I just couldn’t eat much of what I made. Like I said—it was for them that I cooked,” Harry explained, avoiding Tom’s eyes.

When he chanced a glance at him, Tom was frowning in his direction, something strained in the way he held himself. His eyes softened a bit and he took a step closer, close enough to tuck a strand of hair behind Harry’s ear. “Did you ever struggle with eating, after you got away from them?”

“I forget to eat sometimes,” Harry admitted quietly. He’d never had an outright eating disorder, he didn’t think anyway, even though Hermione had thought so for a while. It was just that his hunger cues had become so fucked over the years of eating irregularly, and never enough, that he sometimes didn’t realise he was hungry. “But it’s not on purpose.”

Tom nodded, his thumb stroking along Harry’s cheek. “I understand,” he said, just as quietly. “We didn’t get enough to eat at the orphanage, and by the time I was eight I couldn’t recognise hunger when I felt it. So, I forget sometimes too.”

Harry let out a steady breath, feeling such a deep connection to Tom. No one had ever understood why he didn’t always eat, or why he sometimes didn’t know when to *stop* eating.

Tom dropped his hand, looking down at the counter, though he remained close. “It was difficult, coming here after years at the orphanage,” he murmured. “It was difficult blending in, because we get so much food here. I had to stop myself from eating it like a wild animal. At the orphanage we were all starving most of the time, and meal times would be over in minutes because we’d eat as if someone was going to steal it—which they did, sometimes.”

“And *here*,” he went on, with a small derisive smile, “people were so posh and proper, *picky eaters* even. I was shocked, but I knew I had to blend in, so I beat down every one of my instincts that were screaming at me to inhale as much food as I could. I actually went too far the other way in the beginning, because I actually found myself eating *less* than I did at the orphanage sometimes, here. I was trying so hard to regulate myself that I went too strict. I stopped basing how much I ate off Alphard after that and stuck to how much Theo ate, sometimes Rick if I felt I was having a growth spurt.”

Harry’s heart gave a horrid twinge, a tangible physical pain in his chest. His hand was on Tom’s cheek before he’d made the conscious decision to put it there, his thumb tracing over his sharp cheekbone, the pads of his fingers touching his soft hair. “You can have as much hot chocolate as you want,” he whispered with a smile.

Tom smiled lightly, his cheek pressing into Harry’s hand like a cat asking for scratches. “I knew you were malnourished when I tried mimicking what you ate for like a week in November.”

“You did?” Harry asked, amused.

Tom nodded, his skin moving against Harry's palm. "There were days where I felt light-headed because you didn't eat nearly enough, and then others when I felt sick 'cause you ate far too much. I went back to Theo before the week was up."

Harry smiled, his fingers going under Tom's chin, feeling the light stubble there. "Sorry about that, I'm not that good at eating. I never had the discipline to regulate myself like you did. When I was about fourteen I started getting weekends with Sirius—and Sirius has no clue how much value money has, so he'd order us enough takeaway for ten people. I didn't stop eating until there was nothing left because I couldn't bear to throw anything away. I've never been sicker in my life, we almost had to go to the hospital."

"Did Sirius not realise something was wrong then?"

"He thought I was just excited," Harry said with a sad smile. "And I didn't contradict him, he couldn't have done anything, anyway. He was already fighting the custody battle tooth and nail."

"What tragedies our lives are," Tom said with a derisive laugh. He lifted his hand up until it rested against Harry's on his cheek. His eyes were closed, as if he were basking in the soft touch.

"Hopefully not," Harry said faintly. "They're only tragedies if the end is tragic. Tragic childhoods are only character building. We might still get a comedy, or a romance, or a drama."

He saw a smile stretch across Tom's lips. He watched as his hand was picked up, a small kiss pressed into the palm of it. The feeling of his lips lingered, and Harry wanted him—*wanted* him, more than he'd ever wanted anyone.

"You're right," Tom said, their fingers lacing together briefly before parting ways. "I suppose it will help us find true happiness, because we know what misery looks like."

"Exactly," Harry said with a smile. He didn't say that sometimes he wondered if the happiness he dreamt of was even achievable, or if it was merely a fantasy he'd made up to get through long and cramped nights in the cupboard under the stairs. Despair wasn't a good look, and Harry tried to wear it as little as possible.

"Tell me more," Tom prompted, taking another drink of hot chocolate, his eyes fluttering shut as if it was the best thing he'd ever tasted. "About what you and your parents would do for Christmas, I mean."

Harry laughed, relieved at the change in subject. "Well," he started, "I was banned from waking them up before six o'clock, *at the earliest*—"

He told Tom all about how he'd hover in front of his parents' door before sneaking into bed with them at half five, cuddling before they all got up at six. He told him about how he'd immediately get to open his presents, because he could never wait. Then they'd all have breakfast, pancakes that his mum would make. Harry had never managed to get them as fluffy as she did.

He told Tom about how his dad would put Christmas songs on as he made the hot chocolate, distributing it like a vendor in a shopping centre which always made Harry laugh, his dad's voice booming, '*Hot chocolate! Get your hot chocolate! A kiss for a cup of hot chocolate!*'. They'd all make Christmas dinner together which took up most of the day, and they'd play the board game Harry always got as a present. They'd eat, and his parents would drink some wine, enough for them to sweep each other into a dance around the living room. Usually by that time Sirius was already there, so he'd pick Harry up and dance him around the room until his giggles turned into dizzy shrieks.

They'd always end up doing some sort of karaoke, which always ended with Remus caving and singing a Christmas song against his will.

When he'd finished his tales, they'd migrated into the library, sitting across from each other, their feet touching under the table.

"So it's not unusual for you to wake up early on Christmas day?" Tom asked, an amused glint in his eyes going with his bright smile.

"Well, today was just 'cause I fell asleep so early yesterday," Harry said with a laugh.

"It's nice—" Tom said, cradling his hot chocolate. He was on his second mug and Harry couldn't be happier for it— "that you have these memories of them."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, though his nose scrunched up as his heart twinged. "I don't know, I suppose you're the best person to ask. What's worse? Knowing what you lost, and going through the grief of it, or never having anything in the first place?"

Tom stretched his neck back, scratching at his stubble in thought. He was so much more casual with just Harry, giving in to his most basic urges that he usually suppressed. "Even when you grow up with nothing—an orphan I mean, amongst other orphans—you know you've lost something. You can't identify what it is, but it's like an ache that won't go away. A loneliness that you just don't understand. It tends to grow into anger, bitterness, resentment, recklessness…the list goes on. It's a constant need to fill a hole that was punctured too soon."

Harry watched him, wondering idly how he could have called such a tragedy character building. It was just trauma, and trauma doesn't build character, it cuts it down, chips away at it until there's nothing left. But what happens when there's nothing to chip away at in the first place?

"Do you wish you would've grown up with your parents?" Harry asked, and it was a stupid question, an obvious one. He still wanted to know.

Tom shrugged, sighing. "I wouldn't be me if I did. As much as I resent it, I'll always be an orphan. You can't remove, or forget, or grow out of something like that. I wish I wasn't an orphan, even if it'd change me completely as a person, but I was never one to wish for parents either. I wished for something, but I never put a name to it, like 'mum' or 'dad', the concept was too abstract for me—I didn't understand what parents were supposed to do. I

was curious of course, about myself, that's why I tracked my father down when I was fifteen, but I wouldn't have wanted him to take me in."

Heaving a breath, he went on, "I suppose—I wish I'd've grown up with love." It was said with finality, a sorrow in his eyes that echoed in Harry's chest. "But I don't necessarily wish that would've come in the form of parents, no."

"Did you not—" Harry said, trying not to choke on the pain in his chest— "did you not have friends? Could you not try and find love amongst yourselves?"

Tom smiled, but it was more bittersweet than anything. "For an orphan yourself, Harry, you don't know much about them." His words weren't said with disdain or malice, maybe only a bit more sorrow. "Orphans are like feral animals, we're hungry, and we take, and take, and take, but we have nothing to give. We don't trust, we don't share, we don't love. Anger prevailed amongst us, there is no tenderness or kindness to be found in an orphanage."

"Well," Harry said, trying for a smile, but he could feel that his eyes weren't following, "it's a good thing you're not in the orphanage anymore."

"It—" Tom cut himself off, and Harry could see the deep cutting sadness in his eyes. He realised they'd delved into a hurt that maybe Tom had never talked about before.

"It lingers," Harry finished for him, knowing instinctively what he wanted to say. Because his anger, his grief, his bone deep loneliness—it all lingered. It blackened his heart and crumpled it.

Tom looked over at him, nodding sharply. He opened his mouth, as if to say something but he bit it back. He moved suddenly, sitting up in his seat where he'd been slouching, a hardness passing over his features. "Is this fucking therapy or something?" he spat, voice gruff. He rubbed a hand up his nose, sniffing.

And Harry realised he wanted to cry, that that vulnerable look he'd perceived was what Tom looked like before tears welled in his eyes, that his anger was what followed, because he'd learned that tears got him nowhere—nowhere good anyway—but anger got him respect, it protected him from prying eyes.

Harry reached across the table and took Tom's hand in his, their fingers lacing. Tom flinched, almost imperceptibly. No one tries to console a feral kitten, for fear it'll lash out. Harry does. Because sometimes all a scared animal needs is a tender touch, someone who will show it love.

"It lingers," Harry repeated, voice small. "It's like poison, it spreads and suffocates, and you feel like nothing can ever be sharp enough to sever the ropes squeezing the life out of you. But it's not something you can cut through, every instrument becomes blunt when it touches the ropes. You've got to transform the ropes, let them loosen over time, until they become nothing but thread. And then one day, they'll snap on their own. The imprint of the ropes will still be wrapped around you, but that's all it is, an imprint. Sometimes the anger, the grief, they feel like shackles, tying you down to them. But then one day you feel love again, and it's like the shackles were never there, the scars they left behind only faint."

“Fuck,” Tom said, and his voice cracked on the word. Harry’s heart melted, his thumb rubbing over Tom’s knuckles. “Shut up,” he added, so obviously trying to swallow down all his sorrow, Harry shut up.

“Thank you for the jumper,” Harry said after a few minutes in which Tom didn’t look at him, but clutched his hand like a lifeline. “See? You’ve got something to give, after all.”

Tom’s eyes widened as he looked at him, and they were glassy. He tilted his head back, blinking furiously up at the ceiling. “Please shut up,” he said again, desperate, and his sorrow was beautiful, even though Harry felt awful for thinking so.

His vulnerability, his sorrow, his pain, it was all beautiful. He found him stunning as the marble statue he walked around as, but Harry had always found beauty in cracks, in broken and desolate things. Despair wasn’t a good look, but this wasn’t despair, this was its direct opposite. It was realising that things could be better, that perhaps without realising it, Tom had loosened the ropes suffocating him.

He’d realised that his ribcage could expand beyond that of the suffocating ropes, and he was just taking his first breaths. Harry watched him as he did, and as much as he wanted to push —say things like ‘*it’s okay to cry*’, ‘*let it all out, it doesn’t do any good to bottle things up*’, ‘*you’ll feel better if you cry it out*’— a wild animal could still lash out if it was pushed too much, and Harry thought they’d come too far for Tom to lash out at him in self-preservation.

So he shut up. He ran the pad of his thumb across Tom’s white knuckles, coaxing him into relaxing his grip.

Harry had never understood someone so much, and he doubted anyone had ever understood him so well before. It was refreshing, sharing in this pain, despite how much it hurt.

When he felt it was safe to say something again, he said, “It’s a shame we have to go up to the castle for Christmas dinner, I could’ve made you something really good here. Did I tell you about the stuffing my dad made? Or my mum’s cauliflower cheese?”

Tom looked back over at him, shaking his head minutely. So Harry launched into the tales. He told him about Remus’s creamy mashed potatoes, and Sirius’s homemade sauce that went with the meat. He always refused to divulge the recipe, but Harry was sure he could probably get it out of him.

“What about dessert?” Tom asked, his voice smaller than it usually was.

“My dad changed it up most of the time. But my favourite,” Harry said excitedly, remembering, “was this rhubarb and blackberry crumble he made one year. It was delicious, especially with my mum’s homemade custard.”

“Sounds good,” Tom said with a smile. “The dinner at the castle is good, but yours sounds better.”

“Maybe I can make it for you, one Christmas?” Harry proposed brightly. “I’d be happy to have you.”

“Would you?” Tom asked, his smile fond.

“‘Course,” Harry said, squeezing his hand. “Let’s say next year, you can stay over.”

“Deal,” Tom said. “I want the crumble though, that’s my request. And also the special hot chocolate with all the spices.”

Harry laughed, nodding happily. “I’d love to,” he said truthfully. It was such a thrill to include Tom in his future. There were quite a lot of things he’d expected about coming to this school, but making lifelong friends wasn’t one of them.

The phone rang suddenly, startling Harry who had been looking into Tom’s eyes with something as pathetic as longing.

“Are you expecting a phone call?” Tom asked with a frown.

“No, I don’t—*oh shit*!” he exclaimed, jumping up. “It’s Sirius!”

“Go and pick up then,” Tom said with a bemused smile.

Harry skipped over to the hallway, wrenching the phone off the wall. “Hello?” he said excitedly.

“*Hiya, Harry! I am speaking to Harry, right?*” Sirius's voice said through the receiver.

Harry laughed, delighted to hear his Godfather’s voice after so long. “Yeah it’s me, Sirius. Happy Christmas, how are you?”

“*Happy Christmas, Bambi! I’m doing well, what about you? Not lonely I hope.*”

“I’m good, I’m not alone, I have Tom here with me, a friend,” Harry explained brightly. “And we’re going up to the castle for Christmas dinner. I hope your Christmas isn’t too bad.”

“*Oh that’s good, love,*” Sirius said happily. “*I’m okay, Moony got to come and see me earlier so that was nice, and they’ve decorated the place. It’s a lot nicer than the last rehab I went to, and the staff are very lovely.*”

“Are you clean then?” Harry asked, biting at his thumb.

“*Yep*,” Sirius said, a tinge of pride in his voice that made Harry smile. “*The withdrawals are over, thank God, now I just have to stay clean.*”

“Does that mean you’ll be getting out soon?”

“*I spoke with Remus, and we’ve both decided it’s best if I stay until March, see how I am then. I know it’s a long time, but it’ll give me time to really stamp down the urge without the temptation right under my nose. And then when I do get out, which is always difficult because the temptation is right there, I’ll have the motivation to stay clean while waiting to come and see your show!*”

Harry grinned, thrilled by the news. “That’s brilliant, Sirius, I think you’ve made the right decision to stay until March, even if it means I won’t see you until June. I’ve got a good feeling about this time, I believe in you.”

“*Cheers, kiddo, it means a lot,*” Sirius said, his voice grainy through the phone. “*But, I have more fun things to talk about. Remus, lovely lovely Moony, managed to film Hamlet for me. He dropped the tape off this morning when he came and I watched the whole thing and—*” he paused in his excited words— “*and it’s a good thing that Tom’s there, get him on the phone with you, quick!*”

Harry laughed, shaking his head. “Tom!” he shouted, waiting a couple seconds until he appeared through the doorway with an inquiring look. “Sirius saw the tape for *Hamlet* and he asked me to call you over, come listen.”

Tom smiled, rolling his eyes. “Get on the step,” he said, and Harry did, handing him the phone. He leant on his shoulder, letting Tom hold the phone between them.

“Okay Sirius, Tom’s here.”

“*Oh good, hello Tom, I’m Harry’s Godfather,*” Sirius said brightly.

Tom smiled, bemused. “Hello, nice to meet you.”

“*Likewise, kiddo,*” Sirius said. “*Anyway, I watched the tape and God I wish I’d’ve been there. You were incredible!*” His voice had mounted into an excited shout and Harry laughed. “*Both of you, I couldn’t believe my eyes, it took me ages to watch because I kept rewinding the tape! That was exactly the understanding I had of Hamlet and you brought it to life perfectly, Tom I’ve no idea who you are but you’re a fucking prodigy—*”

The line went quiet for a second and Harry stared, confused.

“*Yes Mabel sorry! I’ll stop shouting, but you saw the tape, love! Isn’t he incredible? That’s my Godson that is—yeah the one who played Horatio—okay, Mabel, I will do—sorry about that.*”

Harry laughed again, and Tom was smiling.

“*Anyway, yes you’ve got fans all over the rehabilitation centre, they all loved you,*” Sirius said brightly. “*There are a few people who want to marry you Tom, are you interested?*”

“Not at all,” Tom said, laughing lightly.

“*Okay, brilliant,*” Sirius said with a laugh. “*Anyway, yeah, I was so blown away and so fucking proud, Bambi,*” Harry blushed, leaning more heavily on Tom. “*All of you were amazing, Alphard as Laertes was genius! And God the chemistry between the both of you! I was bawling my eyes out—I’m sure you’ll have guessed that, Bambi—that last scene was breathtaking. You’d tell me wouldn’t you, Harry, if you and this Tom were—*”

“Oh my god, yes, Sirius, I’d tell you,” Harry was quick to cut in, face flaming. “There’s nothing going on, don’t worry.”

Sirius made a small, suspicious sound. "*I never said I was worried, Tom seems very handsome, and he's just your type!*"

"Okay, God Sirius please shut up," Harry begged, cringing, unable to look up at Tom who was smirking.

"I'm flattered," Tom said, grinning down at Harry, an arm wrapping around his waist.

"*Okay, okay, sorry,*" Sirius said, but Harry just knew he was grinning. "*Who was the kid playing the King? He was brilliant as well.*"

"That's Theo," Harry replied. "He's very good."

"*Oh he was, but you were all incredible. Honestly, it didn't feel like a school play, it was like a professional production, I couldn't believe it!*"

"Thanks Sirius," Harry said, leaning his cheek on Tom's shoulder like he belonged there.

"Yes, thank you," Tom said rather diplomatically.

"*Tell me everything, how did rehearsals go? God, how was* Macbeth*?*" Sirius asked, and Harry smiled.

"I'll leave you to recount it all, bye Sirius," Tom said, leaning his head against Harry's. "Have a quick recovery."

Harry blinked, his heart stuttering. He could just see it, could see himself introducing Tom to Sirius, as his *boyfriend*. He could see Tom asking about Sirius's work, about his career, about his health. He wanted—*wanted*, so badly.

"*Oh, thank you Tom!*" Sirius replied cheerily. "*Bye bye, look after yourself.*"

"You too," Tom said easily, handing the phone to Harry who took it with slack fingers. His mind was already running with family Christmases, weekend trips to see Sirius, listening passively as Sirius and Tom debated a certain paragraph in a certain book that they both felt strongly about.

"*Harry! Harry, can you hear me? Bloody thing—*"

He blinked, quickly pressing the phone to his ear. Tom had disappeared into the kitchen or library, he wasn't sure. "Yeah, yeah, sorry Sirius, I zoned out for a second. What did you want to know? *Macbeth*, right?"

Sirius laughed on the other end of the line. "*You like him, don't you? God I bet it's written all over your face.*"

"For fuck's sake," Harry grumbled, his face flaming.

"*Is there really nothing going on?*"

“No there’s not,” Harry said. “I promise.”

“*Oh, you sound devastated,*” Sirius replied knowingly. “*Tell me everything, love.*”

“I can’t Sirius,” Harry said as quietly as he could. “You know I can’t.”

“*But you like him?*”

“Yeah.”

“*And does he like you?*”

“I doubt it,” Harry said, biting into his bottom lip. “I don’t think so. Hermione thinks so, though.”

“*Oh, so he’s in love with you then?*”

“Sirius!” Harry exclaimed, face flaming. “No, not—that.”

“*What about you?*”

“What about me?” Harry asked, trepidation in his voice.

“*Are you in love with him?*”

“I—no, not—no.”

“*I take it you’d rather not talk about it?*” Sirius said gently, always easily reading Harry’s feelings.

“If you don’t mind,” Harry murmured, embarrassed.

“*Alright then, I won’t tease you. Tell me all about school, I want to know everything*.”

Harry did, happy for the change in conversation. He told Sirius all about the preparations for *Macbeth*, about the actual play, about the casting for *Hamlet*, the rehearsals. He told him about both after parties, leaving enough hints for Sirius to piece things together. The call lasted about an hour, and when it came time to hang up, because a nurse was having a go at Sirius for monopolising the phone, he told Harry that he loved him and that he was sure everything would go alright with Tom, that everyone would fall in love with Harry if they were given the chance.

Harry put the phone back on the wall, Sirius’s last words ringing in his mind.

“You okay?” Tom asked, appearing in the doorway after a few minutes of silence where Harry just sat on the step.

“Yeah, fine,” Harry said quickly, *no thanks to you*, he thought.

“Sure?” Tom asked, holding a hand out and hoisting Harry up. “We have to go soon, we should get ready.”

“Yeah, okay,” he said, nodding along. “Did you know that Remus had paid off a younger student to film the play for him?”

Tom snorted, shaking his head. “Why am I not surprised?” And there it was again, that easy casualness Tom had in regards to his family, as if he knew them, as if they were dear to him.

“Me neither, to be honest,” Harry managed to choke out around a laugh.

Tom grinned. “You go in the shower first if you want. And maybe wear something other than this jumper, something nicer.”

Harry gasped, mock-offended. “This is the nicest item of clothing I own, how dare you?”

Tom laughed. “I know that’s not true.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yes, well I’m not dressing up for a Christmas dinner at school.”

“Come on.”

“No,” Harry whined. “I’ll dress up for your birthday dinner, how about that? That’s something worth getting dressed up for.”

“Alright,” Tom agreed, his Adam’s Apple bobbing as he swallowed. “Okay then, wear whatever you want.”

Harry grinned. “I did not need your permission to do so.”

He left to get ready, not particularly excited about leaving the sanctuary that the chapel had become since the beginning of the holidays. He loved how he and Tom shared the space, how warm it always was, how homely. Harry would have much rather spent the entire day cooking an over the top Christmas meal for the both of them.

Even as he stepped into the shower, he smiled. They’d taken to leaving their bottles and such in there, seeing as though it was just the two of them. Harry was dismayed but also very thrilled to see that his shampoo was empty, so he didn’t feel too guilty in using Tom’s which was almost full.

He informed Tom of it when he stepped out of the bathroom though. He said it was fine with a small smile, and Harry was thrilled to have formed such a close relationship with him. Jumping in that lake was by far one of the least stupid ideas he’d ever had.

They went to the school when they were ready, Harry petulantly buried underneath Tom’s (now his) hoodie. Tom, on the other hand, had abandoned his casual and comfy wear, opting for slacks and a smart shirt. He looked dashing, and Harry drank him in.

The meal was actually quite nice, though Harry sorely missed his parents’ cooking, like he did every year. They sat at a long table, with Professors and students alike. There were only about thirty of them in total. Harry and Tom were seated partly amongst their Professors, and partly amongst some language students. They were once again highly praised for their performance before the holidays, compliments that Harry accepted with a shy ‘thank you’.

“Do you remember the Christmas I spent at your house, Harry?” Snape asked when they’d gotten to dessert.

Harry was startled but he shook it off as best he could. “Yes,” he said with a faint smile. “I remember you and Sirius arguing.”

“Yes, well,” Snape said with a disdainful sniff, “when have we not?”

“Ah, menaces you were,” McGonagall said in her thick Scottish accent, pinching the bridge of her nose. “The lot of you, you lived to annoy me, I’m sure of it!”

“Now, now, Minerva,” Snape said, sitting up straight, “it was *not* my fault.”

“Oh, I don’t want to hear it,” McGonagall snapped, though she was smiling, as if reenacting an old argument.

“You had a favourite, anyway,” Snape said with a prim sniff.

“Ah, James,” Dumbledore said with a knowing smile, “you were awfully fond of him, weren’t you, Minerva?”

McGonagall smiled. “At least he was the sporty type, unlike *some*,” she said pointedly, glancing at Snape who rolled his eyes. “And it’s a good thing Harry takes after his father in that regard.” She gave Harry a wink, making him smile.

“He’s generally a lot more like Lily,” Snape countered.

“You only tell yourself that because you want to give yourself an excuse as to why you like him,” McGonagall sniped while Dumbledore chuckled. “He is James’s son, there’s no denying it.”

“As he is Lily’s,” Snape said, looking offended.

“Do you know who I see in him?” Dumbledore asked them at large. Harry glanced at Tom who seemed very absorbed in the conversation. “Regulus Black,” he announced.

McGonagall took a sharp breath. “Don’t say things like that, Albus.”

Harry was surprised. All he knew of Regulus Black was that he’d killed himself at sixteen. Sirius never spoke of him, never could. He’d babbled mindlessly a few times, tears streaming down his face, high off his arse.

“It is not a criticism,” Dumbledore said kindly. “We seem to only remember the deaths of the deceased, you must remember what he was like, no? A quiet boy, calculated, talented beyond belief, shy, though he was confident. There was a certain sorrow behind his eyes, yes, but that is not always a bad thing.”

Harry thought Dumbledore might be onto something, itching to know more about this mysterious and elusive boy.

“I think you’re right, Albus,” Snape said faintly, looking a bit pale. “I was his friend, Regulus,” he added, looking at Harry, “it drove Sirius up the wall, but he was my friend. He was very discreet, kept himself to himself most of the time, but he was funny. He was interesting too, always had a strange perspective on things. He understood himself too well, he was very introspective, and it was a strength.” *—until it wasn’t,* went unsaid.

“Did he and Sirius get along?” Harry asked tentatively. “And with my dad?”

“They did and they didn’t,” Snape replied pensively. “I think Regulus loved Sirius a lot, more than anyone else in the world, but Sirius was very self-absorbed, and he didn’t always pay attention to his little brother. Regulus told me though that he and Sirius had been best friends throughout their entire childhoods, only growing apart when they were in school. As to your father, from what I know he was always kind to Regulus, though Regulus didn’t hold him in high regard.”

“He felt like my dad had stolen Sirius away from him, right?” Harry asked, his nose scrunching up in discomfort.

“It could be that,” Snape said with a tight smile that told Harry that he’d hit the nail on the head.

“How did you know Lily, Severus?” McGonagall asked curiously.

Snape explained how he and Harry’s mum had been childhood friends, growing up in the same neighbourhood. He knew of Hogwarts because his mum had been, though she hadn’t built a career for herself. Snape had told Lily all about the school and convinced her to try and get in for art or music, because she was talented in both aspects.

“Did you know,” Snape said, looking at Harry with a conspiratorial smirk, “that Petunia tried to get in?”

“What?” Harry asked, surprise written all over his face.

“Yes,” Snape said, looking triumphant. “When Lily got in, Petunia was green with jealousy. She auditioned for art, I think, despite the fact she’d gone over the age restriction. She had no talent of course, and she was refused.”

“Is that why they hated each other?” Harry asked.

“In part,” Snape nodded, “their relationship had always been rocky, sister rivalry I think. I know your grandfather favoured Petunia while your grandmother favoured Lily, so it was a strange situation. And then when we grew up, Petunia cut Lily off completely. They had one last vicious fight just after Lily’s first album came out, and then nothing.”

Harry’s life made a bit more sense. Why Petunia could never quite look him in the eye, why her and her oh-so-normal family couldn’t stand him. They prided themselves on being perfectly ordinary, whereas Harry had come from a household where being special, out of the ordinary, had been encouraged.

It was strange that his three Professors knew more than him about the people he should've grown up with. Harry was quiet for the rest of the meal, pensive. They bid their Professors goodnight when they left, and Harry was eager to get back to the comfort of the chapel.

Night had fallen, the dinner having gone on for hours and the sun setting abnormally early. The moon was bright in the early night, stars starting to twinkle above them. Harry's breath came out as white smoke in front of him as the grass crunched under his feet, and the lake was covered in a frosty fog.

"How did they die?" Tom asked softly, his voice gentle in the bitterly cold quiet of the grounds.

"Do you not know?" Harry asked, curious. Thinking about it made his heart hurt, but the bitterness had died down somewhat.

Tom shook his head. "No, I never—I never really had access to the news."

"Oh, well," Harry said, looking in front of him, speaking slowly. "It was Halloween, they were going to Sirius's house for a party. They'd just left me with my babysitter, she was a nice girl. Anyway, not an hour after my parents had left, the police turned up, letting us know that they'd died in a car crash on their way to the party. A drunk driver, Peter Pettigrew, his name was, ran a red light and crashed into them." He cleared his throat, stuffing his hands further into his pockets.

He still remembered how bright the police lights were, how the police officer had crouched down to his height to explain what had happened. How he'd tried to comfort Amy, his babysitter, who was crying hysterically, clutching at him. He hadn't really understood, then.

"My dad died on impact, my mum didn't though. Apparently she had time to suffocate on her own blood before the paramedics arrived. The man—Peter—tried to make a run for it, but the police caught up to him. I don't know if he's still in prison. I was taken into the police station for a while, Amy came with me, she was my babysitter. She wouldn't let me go alone. I think I understood what had happened when Sirius turned up—he didn't start crying until he got to me, but he had this look about him."

They'd gotten to the chapel, and Tom opened the door silently. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, "for asking. I shouldn't have."

"No it's fine," Harry said with a sad smile, closing the door behind them. "I don't mind talking about it."

"I do," Tom said faintly, turning to face Harry before pulling him into his arms rather unexpectedly. Harry went, burrowing into Tom's chest, his arms wrapping around his waist. Tom held him tight. "I didn't like that at all," he whispered, "picturing you as a child, finding out your parents had just died."

Harry smiled, taking what Tom was offering him. "It's an old hurt," he said quietly. "I got stuck on anger and depression for a long time, but I got to acceptance, eventually. It wasn't a fun night, but it was a long time ago."

Tom hummed, still not letting go.

“Maybe there’s a world where I ended up at the orphanage, with you,” Harry murmured, half joke, half wishful thinking.

“You would’ve gone into the foster system before the orphanage, but maybe,” Tom said quietly, speaking the words into Harry’s hair. “I doubt I would have liked you though.”

“I don’t know, my relatives threatened me with the orphanage all the time, or St Brutus’s,” Harry replied, his eyes having fluttered shut, breathing in the smell against Tom’s fancy shirt. “I bet I could’ve befriended you.”

“Let’s have a glass of wine,” Tom said, pressing a quick kiss into Harry’s hair and pulling back. “I want to show you something.”

Harry was immediately intrigued, following Tom around as he served them a glass of wine each. To his surprise, Tom led him over to the piano. Harry hovered, watching as Tom set his glass of wine on the piano and sat down on the stool.

Harry’s breath caught as Tom started to play, realising he hadn’t really expected him to. It was Chopin’s *Prélude in E minor*. Harry listened to the whole thing, completely entranced as he watched Tom play, his fingers moving over the keys with an ease that shouldn’t come to someone who rarely played.

“I didn’t know you could play,” he breathed out as Tom finished. He felt breathless, light-headed.

“Now you do,” Tom said as he turned to look at him, a small smile on his face. He took a drink of wine and patted the edge of the seat next to him, beckoning Harry to come over.

Harry went, leaving his glass on top of the piano as he squeezed in next to Tom. It was a very narrow stool, and they were pressed together from shoulder to toe.

“Can you play?” he asked, his fingers resting on the keys.

“No,” Harry replied quietly.

“Let me teach you,” Tom said, picking Harry’s hands up and placing them on the keys, laying his own on top of them. His face was pinched in concentration, his cold fingers clashing against Harry’s that had already warmed up.

“Okay then,” Harry whispered, feeling the moment intimately. He let Tom move his fingers like a puppet master pulling the strings. It was choppy, and Harry didn’t use the right pressure to press down the keys, but it was still lovely.

They laughed together as Harry’s fingers slipped, pressing down the wrong keys. Tom sounded fond as he said, “You’re a lost cause, I think.”

“Teach me anyway,” Harry replied.

They stayed at it for hours, long enough for them to finish the bottle off, their lips stained red. Harry's arms ached from the angles they had to maintain for Tom to move his fingers with his own.

"Where did you learn to play?" Harry asked, his words only slightly slurred, as he watched Tom play gently. He'd moved onto *Rêverie* by Debussy, the soft notes ringing out in the library. His fingers were made for the piano, bony and long—elegant.

"I taught myself," Tom replied, concentration never waning. "There was this old piano in an abandoned building not far from the orphanage. I used to leave and go to it. The other kids started thinking the place was haunted, because they often heard a ghostly, out of tune piano playing."

"That's incredible," Harry said honestly. "The haunted piano vibe really fits you."

"Thank you," Tom said with a grin, taking it as a compliment, as Harry knew he would.

He looked utterly devastating in the little light they had, surrounded by books, playing the piano as if it were second nature to him, the smell of red wine permeating the air.

"Can I stay in your room?" Harry asked spontaneously, his tongue loosened by the wine.

Tom stopped playing, the last notes echoing around the bookshelves. "For tonight?"

"I was hoping…for—you know," Harry said, losing his nerve as Tom looked at him.

"Yes, yeah," Tom replied, nodding. "That's fine, stay—stay as long as you want."

Harry blinked, watching him go back to the piano, though he seemed distracted. He'd not expected such enthusiastic agreement, but he wasn't going to complain.

They decided to go to bed not long after, both of them unwilling to open another bottle of wine. They brushed their teeth together, sharing the sink. Their toothbrushes already sat together in the cup, so it only felt fitting—and neither of them wanted to let the other use the bathroom first.

Harry got the pleasure of watching Tom strip down for bed, enclosed in the small room together. He unbuttoned his shirt first, letting it fall from his shoulders before dropping it in his washing basket. He was left shirtless, in his slacks, and Harry's mouth watered as he unbuckled his belt, popped the button, and lowered the zip. He looked sinful like that, like he was about to crawl over Harry and crowd him down into the mattress. Harry watched as, instead of doing that, Tom pushed his trousers off, revealing his long legs, and folded them before setting them back in his wardrobe.

Harry looked around the room, smiling as he saw some of his things on the nightstand. His sketchbook was still there and he itched to see the picture he'd drawn that morning, but he didn't.

He busied himself with pulling his jumper and t-shirt off, and shimmying out of his trousers. He thought that if he'd be sharing the room with Tom for a while, he might as well sleep

shirtless, as that was how he usually slept.

“Do I really have to wait a year before you make some more of that hot chocolate?” Tom asked as they got into bed.

Harry laughed, surprised by the question. “Traditionally, yes. But I suppose we could make an exception for your birthday, would you like some then?”

“Yes,” Tom said with a satisfied smile, pulling the quilt up to his shoulders.

Harry, as usual, shuffled until he was sprawled on his front, arms shoved under the pillow, the quilt trapped between his legs.

“Do you not get cold?” Tom asked curiously. “I noticed you never sleep with the quilt on—you, like, choke it.”

He was laughing lightly, amused at Harry’s odd behaviour. Harry laughed as well, choking the quilt a bit tighter. “No, I get really hot when I sleep, I don’t know why. And I like how the cold feels on my skin,” he yawned, “and I like holding something when I sleep.”

“I’d noticed,” Tom said with a smile.

Harry felt how he blushed but he nodded. He couldn’t deny it, he’d positively smothered Tom when they’d slept cuddled up together. He wondered what it would feel like to sleep like that with him in their states of undress.

“Night, Harry,” Tom said, voice achingly soft.

“Night night, Tom,” he replied sleepily.

Tom turned the light off, and Harry wondered what he thought about before sleeping. He wondered if he thought about books, words, writing, or playing the piano, or the orphanage. He wondered if he felt lonely or content, if he fell asleep quickly or slowly.

He listened as Tom moved from time to time, the sheets rustling in the quiet. He listened to his breathing, wishing he could hear his heartbeat against his ear. Eventually, his breathing evened out and Harry fell asleep to the sound of it.

— Scene five —

The next day it was Tom who woke up first, and Harry awoke to the sound of pages being turned again. He kept his eyes closed for a while, just listening as Tom thumbed the pages as he read, a small yawn coming from him.

“Is Dorian Gray boring you?” he asked, voice thick with sleep, opening his eyes and squinting in the bright light coming from the window.

Tom looked over at him and laughed, his eyes bright. “No, I’m just tired.”

“Did you not sleep well?” Harry asked, rolling over onto his back and stretching. He had a bit of a headache, from the red wine, most likely.

“I kept waking up, did you not hear me?” Tom said, looking over at him. “I got up like four times.”

“Did you?” Harry said, sitting up in his bed. “No I didn’t hear anything, red wine tends to knock me out.”

“I could tell,” Tom said with a laugh. “You were fighting the quilt at one point.”

Harry snorted. “Yeah, I do that sometimes. I must have been too warm. Why couldn’t you sleep?”

Tom shrugged. “I don’t know, sometimes I just wake up a lot. I think I was a bit cold too.”

There were many things Harry wanted to offer for that particular problem, most notably that Tom could’ve slipped into his bed and stolen his warmth. “If you’re cold you can take my quilt,” he said instead, “I won’t mind, just give me a jumper or something to hold—or beat up, depending on the mood.”

Tom laughed, and Harry did too, if only because the sound of Tom’s laugh made him exceptionally happy. “I’ll keep it in mind,” he said.

They lounged about in bed for a while, Tom reading and Harry watching him. They chatted from time to time. It was a lazy morning, a few bright rays of sunlight piercing the clouds and casting the room in sunlight.

“What are you annotating?” Harry asked when Tom grabbed his pencil from the nightstand after flicking through his book with a frown. He leant his cheek in his hand, his body angled towards Tom.

“What you said yesterday,” Tom said, clearly underlining something in the book, “it made me think of something in here.”

“What is it?” he asked, heart shuddering at the thought of Tom annotating something in his book that reminded him of Harry.

"'*Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic'*, it reminded me of what you were saying about how our lives don't have to be tragedies, that the tragic was character building."

Harry smiled, watching Tom set the pencil back down, his cheekbones pink. "Building into something exquisite?"

"Yeah," Tom said faintly, not meeting Harry's eye as he went back to his book.

They finally got out of bed not long after, Harry craving a cup of coffee to chase his mild headache away. There was still a certain lethargy in the air, an unwillingness to do anything productive. They ended up playing a variety of card games from a pack of cards Abraxas had left behind.

Abraxas loved card games, and he was rather good at card tricks. He'd roped Harry and some of the others into a game of poker once, effectively robbing Harry of two hundred pounds by the end of it. Harry was never so stupid as to bet money against him ever again.

Tom was endearingly bad at card games, and always ended up having the worst of luck when he couldn't use his brains to win. Harry, on the other hand, had always been quite lucky. Tom's scowl deepened with every loss while Harry's grin grew brighter.

"That's it," Tom snapped when he'd lost again. "You're cheating, I'm not playing anymore."

Harry laughed raucously. "You're such a sore loser! I promise I'm not cheating, you're just very unlucky."

"Put the cards away, I refuse to play," Tom declared, crossing his arms over his chest and sniffing. Harry smiled fondly, if Tom were wearing his usual crisp shirt and slacks he'd look haughty and condescending. As it turned out, his legs were folded under himself on the chair in a comfy pair of trousers, his chest swamped in a hoodie, the hood pulled over his head, only his fluffy brown curls sticking out. And he was pouting, which was just adorable.

"Okay," Harry agreed, his head resting on his palm as he stared at Tom like a lovesick fool, "what do you want to do then?"

"Chess," Tom said pointedly, "I want to play chess."

Harry sighed, though he was grinning. He'd been warned to never play chess against Tom, apparently he was a menace across the board whilst being an insufferable winner. To add insult to injury: Harry was *terrible* at chess.

"Okay then," he conceded before going to grab the chessboard that stood proudly on one of the small tables beside a sofa. Harry couldn't quite remember whose it was, Rick's or Abraxas's would be his guess. *Though maybe it was Alphard's?* He couldn't remember.

They played, and Harry lost, *badly*. It was humiliating. Tom didn't even gloat, he just sat there with a smug smirk, eyeing the pieces he'd stolen from Harry whilst most of his own pieces remained on the board.

“Rematch?” Tom proposed with a grin, and Harry couldn’t refuse.

They played five matches, Tom’s ego restoring itself with every victory. His smirk turned into a full manic grin, a laugh worthy of an evil villain escaping him every time he cornered Harry’s king.

Harry was humiliated, but seeing Tom like that was a victory in itself.

“Rematch?” Tom proposed again, already deftly setting up the chess pieces.

“No way,” Harry said, defeated. “This is embarrassing, you’re too good for me.”

“Oh?” Tom said, looking pleased beyond belief, stretching with his hands behind his head. “You admit that I’m the best at chess?”

“Yes,” Harry said with a bemused laugh, “I’d be stupid not to. Do you admit you’re shit at card games?”

Tom scowled. “Card games are for the weak minded, chess requires skill, which you do not have by the way.”

“Thanks,” Harry said drily. “You should play against Ron at some point, he’s really good.”

“Better than me?” Tom asked with a sceptical look.

“I don’t know,” Harry said with a shrug. “I’m rubbish at chess and I lose whether I play you or him.”

“I bet I’m better,” Tom replied happily.

Harry rolled his eyes, smiling at the antics. “What do you want to do now then?”

Tom hummed in thought. “Piano?” he asked.

“Oh!” Harry exclaimed, an idea coming to him. “Why don’t I teach you how to play the guitar? Since you’re teaching me the piano?”

Tom gave him a bemused smile but nodded. “Alright then, go on. I think Gaspar left his guitar behind.”

Harry grinned and got up to go and get it. Much like Abraxas and Theo’s room, he was well acquainted with Rick and Gaspar’s. Rick’s side was messy-neat, his bed was made but it was crumpled, his things were strewn around but they were organised. Gaspar’s side was *cramped*, he just had so much *stuff*. Books towered on his desk, papers and notebooks and binders were strewn all over. The floor space he had was covered in instruments and the odd t-shirt. He had one acoustic guitar, an electric one, and countless *items* to take care of them; extra string, caps, stands.

Harry smiled at the sight and picked up the acoustic guitar from its stand, careful to not damage it.

“Do you know anything about the guitar?” he asked on the landing, looking down at Tom as he made his way back down to the library.

“The bare minimum,” Tom replied.

“Okay,” Harry said happily, pulling up the chair beside him and turning it to face him. He sat down, setting the guitar on his lap. “Is there a song you’d like to do? Something easy?”

Tom hummed in thought, pulling one of his knees up onto the chair with him. “I quite liked that song you did for us, your mother’s,” he said with a smile.

Harry’s cheeks flushed red instantaneously. He nodded slowly, trying to overcome his surprise. “Okay, well it’s pretty easy so that’s a good choice, and it’ll get you familiar with a few easy chords.”

“Okay, what are the chords?” Tom asked like a curious student.

Harry blanched, his mind not supplying him with the necessary information. “Er—fuck, you would choose a song that I only know from muscle memory,” he said with a laugh. “Hold on.”

He plucked the strings one by one, adjusting them to make sure the guitar was tuned, before strumming out the first few chords, concentrating on what he was doing. “Okay, okay,” he said, looking back at Tom, “E, D, A. There’s a couple of variations for A later on, but we’ll do that later.”

“Alright,” Tom said with a smile, “teach me then.”

“Okay, so for E, you want to place your fingers like this,” Harry explained, making sure Tom got to see the placement, “and for this song you’ll strum once, wait a few beats, and again before immediately passing into D which is strummed a few times. And for D your fingers are like this. So, that looks like this.”

Harry did the sequence, trying to make the chords as clean as possible so Tom could see and hear them properly. He handed the guitar over to him afterwards while he frowned in concentration.

“Okay, you try,” Harry encouraged, watching as Tom placed his fingers. “Make sure to press with the tips of your fingers, and that the string is flat against the guitar or the sound will come out wonky.”

Tom did, cringing as he strummed it and the sound didn’t come out right.

“That’s okay,” Harry said with a laugh. “I’m a bad teacher, I forget you don’t necessarily know how to strum the thing. Here—” he got up and hovered beside Tom, putting one hand at the back of his seat, and one hand back on the guitar— “I’ll hold the chord for you, so you don’t have to think about that, and you focus on getting the strumming right.”

They did that for a bit, Harry giving pointers from time to time to get it to sound better. His arm migrated from the back of the chair to around Tom’s shoulders at some point, but he

wasn't sure when.

"Okay, that's good," Harry said with a smile, "can you remember how I played at the beginning?"

"I think so," Tom replied, concentrating. He was oddly pliant, listening to Harry without question.

"Okay good, we'll start from the beginning and I'll switch the chord for you, from E to D, we'll do that and then you can do the chords."

Tom nodded, watching Harry's fingers. He did well, and Harry managed to switch chords at the right time, though it was his fault when it didn't come out right.

"What did I do?" Tom asked, frowning at the sound.

"Er—that's my fault," Harry said with a guilty smile. "For the E chord you strum every string, right? Well for D you don't pluck these two," he pinched the two thickest strings between his fingers, "you start on this one and down."

Tom sent him a look, though he seemed relieved it wasn't his fault. They did it again and it came out okay, so Harry coached Tom through his finger placement for the chords.

"Why is the fucking E so hard to do?" Tom asked, trying to get the sound to come out right. "My fingers keep touching the other strings."

Harry laughed lightly, he'd pulled up a chair beside Tom instead of across from him and wrapped his hand around the guitar again, placing his fingers over Tom's. "It's tricky, I know," he said softly, manoeuvring his fingers this way and that, "it just takes practice, but you've got the perfect fingers for playing the guitar, good dexterity."

He didn't miss the way Tom's lips quirked up at the comment.

"Okay so that's E," Harry said, his fingers ghosting along Tom's, "now try and switch to D which is easier, and then A which is even easier." He had Tom do that a few times, just switching between chords and strumming randomly.

He was a quick learner, and his fingers really were perfect for the guitar. They kept at it for a while, until Tom could seamlessly switch between chords and get the general rhythm of the song sounding out in the library.

"That's it," Harry said happily. It was a strange experience, to watch someone else—to watch *Tom*—play his mother's song, her most personal song. Harry hadn't really thought about what he was giving away—what part of himself he was giving away—when he'd agreed to it. It scared him for a second, but Tom looked over at him, grinning brightly, looking for all the world like he was proud of himself; and Harry thought that he'd give every part of himself away just to see that smile.

"This is easy," Tom said brightly. "But my fingers hurt a bit."

Harry laughed, taking Tom's hand to look over his red fingertips where the imprint of the strings stood out. "You get used to it, though you might be pressing a bit hard."

"I'll have to try and work on the pressure, see what's right," Tom replied, plucking one of the guitar strings. "But that's enough for today."

"Okay, you did great," Harry said happily, standing up. "I'll go put Gaspar's guitar back."

"Hold on," Tom said, catching Harry's sleeve, "play me the song?"

"What?" Harry said automatically, confused by Tom's hopeful look.

"Your mother's song," Tom clarified, "sing it, like you did last time. I'll teach you whatever you want on the piano."

Harry felt his cheeks flush, heat warming up his chest. "I er—uhm—er—"

Tom raised an eyebrow, looking him over. "Are you shy?" he asked incredulously.

Harry blew up his cheeks, scratching the back of his head. "I'm not *shy*, I just—I'm not that good. It's er—embarrassing?"

"Embarrassing?" Tom echoed, looking stunned. "Harry, it was lovely."

Harry's cheeks flared up again, his eyes dropping to the floor, his collar feeling increasingly hot.

"God, you really are embarrassed," Tom commented, incredulous. He stood up, tilting Harry's chin back until their eyes met. "You don't have to, obviously. But I'd love to hear the song again, it would be a pleasure to hear it from you. I would never ask you to do something just to embarrass you—not anything like this, anyway."

Harry smiled lightly, swallowing. "Okay," he choked out. "Yeah, I can do it for you, it's just—yeah, go on then. Anything I want on the piano?"

"Anything at all," Tom said with a winning smile.

"Okay then," Harry said, hating how shy he felt.

Tom lit up a cigarette and sat back down, watching Harry as he settled down. His eyes never left him as Harry sang the song, though Harry never looked at him, scared his voice would wobble or crack if he did.

Tom clapped happily when he finished, and when Harry looked up he was grinning. And in that moment, Harry caught a flash of his dad, watching lovingly as his mum sang their song. He laughed nervously, trying to shake the feeling.

"Lovely," Tom said fondly, roughing up Harry's hair. "What's your request for the piano?" he asked, already getting up to go over.

Harry smiled cheekily. “You wouldn’t happen to know *Money Money Money* by ABBA would you?”

Tom stopped in his tracks, his back tensing up. “You’re kidding,” he whispered, sounding utterly dismayed. “Of course I fucking don’t.”

Harry laughed at the dramatics. “Shame, maybe Gaspar’s got the sheet music?”

“Fuck,” Tom grumbled, turning back to look at Harry. “I’m gonna have to ring him, aren’t I?”

Harry grinned. “If he doesn’t have it here, then yeah. I’m sure the lads will love the performance.”

Tom stared at him, his expression unreadable. “You evil evil person, Harry Potter,” he said finally, making Harry burst into laughter. “God, it’s a good thing your song was worth it.”

Harry continued laughing as he watched Tom traipse over to the phone, picking out the piece of paper with Gaspar’s number on it pinned to the wall. They’d all attached their parents’ or guardians’ numbers on the wall during the year, just in case.

“Hi Mrs. Avery,” Harry heard Tom saying from the hallway, “I’m sorry to bother you, this is Tom Riddle, Gaspar’s classmate—yes, fine thank you, and you? —yes, a lovely Christmas, and you? —brilliant, is Gaspar there? —okay, thank you, you too, yes lovely to speak to you —”

Harry laughed, he couldn’t help it.

“Hi Gaspar, it’s Tom—” he huffed, clearly at his wit’s end, “—yes me and Harry are fine—no, it’s nothing—yes, a happy Christmas to you too—listen, Gaspar, I’m in a bit of a predicament. I’ve found myself in a bargain with Harry and I need your help to hold up my end.” Harry heard him take a deep breath, and he knew he was pinching the bridge of his nose. “Do you have, or would you be able to acquire the sheet music for *Money Money Money* by ABBA on the piano?”

It was silent for a second and Harry held his breath, his jaw aching under the force of his grin.

“Yes—for God’s sake who cares that I’m playing the piano again—yes, I’m teaching Harry—No, for fuck’s sake, can you get it or not?—Okay good, bring it when you come back to school—it’s not that big of a deal, do shut up—don’t think I won’t break your guitar—yes, the electric one, though I’ll break both for good measure—no don’t you *dare* call Theo about this—oh for the love of Christ, goodbye Gaspar, see you soon—yes, happy new year to you too.”

Harry shook his head, completely bewildered by the conversation, laughing as Tom hung up the phone with a sigh.

He reappeared in the library looking murderous. “I hope you’re happy.”

Harry just burst out laughing again.

Even though he would have to wait for his song of choice, Tom still opened a bottle of wine and took him over to the piano. Harry didn't actually do much learning, sometimes trying out bits and pieces, though he mainly just watched Tom, or let Tom put his hands over his to guide his movements across the keys.

Harry was just happy to drop his head onto Tom's shoulder and watch his fingers dance across the keys, filling the library with beautiful music, as he sipped his red wine.

— Scene six —

The days between Christmas and New Year's always felt like limbo, in some strange way. Harry never knew what day it was, what the date was. Days passed in the blink of an eye or felt like they went on for centuries—there was no middle ground. They were the few days in the year where time came to a stop and was wholly irrelevant.

In those days he and Tom did various activities at odd hours of the day; they played the guitar or the piano, drank wine or whiskey, read together or to one another sometimes when they were both interested in the same book, took naps in the evening, stayed awake all night chatting, cooked together, played card games, played chess…

They were some of the best days of Harry's life. Perhaps it was the isolation, or the limbo-esque time span of those days, or even the holiday glow, but Harry felt like Tom had become as indispensable to his life as Ron and Hermione were.

He couldn't imagine a world in which he no longer woke up with Tom in the bed next to his, where he didn't make dinner for two, where he didn't have someone there at all hours of the day to discuss an obscure book, where he didn't get to hear Tom playing the piano.

They talked about everything and anything, Harry telling Tom of the past productions he'd done, of the shenanigans he got up to at school with his friends, of time spent with Sirius—the good parts and the bad parts—of his memories of his parents, of his relatives, of his favourite things and the things that made him sad. He told him that he'd never actually had sex, that he'd only gotten off with people efficiently and discreetly.

He told Tom *everything*, every little thing that made Harry, well, Harry.

And Tom did the same. He told Harry of his years at the orphanage, of what they taught in the primary school he went to, of what he got up to in his free time, who he shared a room with, of going to Church every Sunday—which led to them speaking at length about religion. He told Harry of his aspirations, of how he saw his life later on, of his past years at Hogwarts, of his summer at Theo's and how it was Theo who had given him the chain he kept around his neck, of his childhood fears and insecurities, of his favourite books and pieces of music, explaining why he loved them and what made them so unique in his eyes.

They spent countless hours layed out on the floor of the library or their bedroom, smoking joints and laughing, telling tales and stories.

And just like that, Tom was Harry's best friend.

But it didn't feel like they were classmates, or friends, or best friends, or even *lovers*. To Harry, Tom had become the perfect person—*his* perfect person. He was someone Harry could just bare himself to, the most intimate parts of himself, and Tom would just laugh, or touch his cheek, or his hand, or give him a hug, or say '*roll a joint*', or '*get us another glass, will you?*' or '*come and listen to this*' before playing one of his favourite pieces on the piano.

So, when the 31st came, Harry knew exactly what he wanted to give Tom as a birthday present.

“Good morning!” he exclaimed excitedly, waking up first like he sometimes did, ignoring the clock that said it was past noon. They’d gone to bed at four in the morning, they deserved the lie in.

“*Oof*—” Tom huffed as Harry jumped onto his bed, smothering him.

“Happy birthday!” Harry exclaimed, propping himself up on Tom’s chest.

Tom groaned, trying to hide under the quilt. “You wished me happy birthday last night you wanker,” he complained, his voice thick with sleep.

“So what?” Harry said with a grin, trying to pull the quilt off Tom’s face.

“Shut up,” Tom huffed, freeing his arms and wrapping them around Harry tightly, squashing him into his chest. “Shut up shut up shut up. I’ve got a fucking headache. We shouldn't have opened that second bottle.”

Harry laughed, fighting Tom’s hold as best he could. He couldn’t actually say anything, suffocating against the quilt.

“Stop—fighting—” Tom said, struggling against Harry’s thrashing, his laughter filling up the room even if it was muffled against the material. Tom rolled over, obviously trying to silence Harry against the mattress—but the bed was truly tiny.

They rolled straight off the side, Harry landing on Tom’s chest while he landed on his back. It winded both of them, the thud echoing in the room, before they burst into laughter.

“You idiot,” Harry said between giggles, slapping Tom’s shoulder. The quilt was tangled around them in a very strange way, leaving both their bare chests to bear the brunt of the cold air.

“What a shit wake up,” Tom grumbled, pushing himself up, unseating Harry from his lap, “I thought it was supposed to be a pleasant thing to be woken up on your birthday.”

“That was all your fault,” Harry said accusingly.

“You assaulted me!” Tom exclaimed indignantly.

Harry laughed, shaking his head. He got up, holding a hand out for Tom who took it, looming over him a second later. He had grown somewhat desensitised to Tom’s close proximity, but it still made his heart beat wildly in his chest. Especially when Tom was only in his boxers, as was Harry.

“Shall I make you that hot chocolate I promised then?” Harry asked, smiling up at him.

Tom’s frown smoothed out, leaving place to a small grin. “Why didn’t you start with that?”

Harry shook his head, laughing. He moved about the room, pulling some clothes on. He had, in the meantime, washed the jumper, but he still wore it most of the time.

They traipsed down to the kitchen and Harry made the hot chocolate as promised, the smell of it filling the chapel in a lovely cinnamon scent. Tom looked delighted to have a mug of it between his hands again. He looked soft in the light streaming in from the window, his frame wrapped in a warm jumper, his hair loose and messy.

“Is it good?” Harry asked, sipping his own.

“Really good,” Tom replied with a grin.

Harry smiled into his mug, pleased with himself. He cleared his throat after a bit, feeling a tad nervous when Tom looked at him curiously. “Would you—I have a present for you, if you want it.”

Tom blinked, his tongue darting out to lick the chocolate from his upper lip. “A present? Why did you get me a present?”

“Because it’s your birthday,” Harry said with a laugh. “But I didn’t buy anything special, it’s—it’s a bit more personal.”

He knew he’d be giving Tom his present from the way curiosity lit up his eyes. “Alright then, I accept your present,” he said tentatively, though Harry could tell he was a bit uncomfortable.

“I’ll go get it,” he said with a smile, setting his mug on the counter and leaving the kitchen, heading for Alphard’s room—he’d started thinking of Tom’s room as his, the one he shared with Alphard feeling alien to him. He hoped Alphard wouldn’t mind the switch.

He got to the room and found what he was looking for easily. It was his copy of *Hamlet*, the one he’d rehearsed with, made up of all his annotations on characters and cues and stage directions. In it was locked the essence of Horatio—*his*, *Tom’s*, Horatio. It was such a personal item, something that Harry would have undoubtedly kept for the rest of his life to commemorate the memory of the play. But he wanted to give it to Tom, and had thought long and hard about it.

“What have you got for me then?” Tom asked as Harry reappeared in the doorway. He was sitting on the counter, his ankles crossed, as he sipped his hot chocolate, the landscape through the window as a backdrop enhancing how stunning he looked.

Harry smiled shyly, the book hidden behind his back. He waltzed up to Tom and held it out to him, looking anywhere but at him. “Here you go,” he said, wanting for him to just take it.

Tom took it slowly, confusion and amusement passing over his features. “You got me a copy of *Hamlet*?” he said with a laugh. “I’m sure you know this Harry, but I already have—” he stopped, jaw dropping and smile falling off his face as he flicked it open and saw what it actually was— “oh my god.”

Harry watched, apprehensive, as Tom's lips parted, shock passing over his face as his cheeks flushed with colour. He flicked through the book almost reverently, awestruck by what he held in his hands.

"Happy birthday," Harry said faintly, a tentative smile pulling at his lips as he tried to catch Tom's eye while he fiddled with his hands.

"Harry…" Tom said, trailing off. His eyes kept catching on different annotations. Pencil tarnished most of the pages, cramped writing taking up every blank area of the pages, some getting quick sketches. He looked up, his eyes wide. "You can't give me this."

"'Course I can," Harry replied easily, instead of: *I'd give you the world*, which was his initial rebuttal.

"Why are you giving me this?" Tom asked, his eyes searching him obsessively, as if he could find the answers he was looking for on his face. Little did he know, he only needed to glance at Harry's heart to glean understanding.

Harry shrugged, his cheeks heating up. "You told me that you didn't want anyone else as Horatio—that you wanted *my* Horatio. Well," he said, gesturing vaguely to the book, "here he is."

"God," Tom mumbled, his eyes going back to the book. "Thank you," he said earnestly, the sincerity dripping from his tongue, "this is—this means—fuck, I feel a bit weird." He laughed, rubbing at his chest as if it hurt, though his eyes never left the book.

"I'm glad you're happy with it," Harry said, his heart soaring at how pleased Tom seemed, if a bit overwhelmed. "More hot chocolate?" he asked with a smile, hoping to brush the whole present thing off.

"Yes please," Tom replied, looking up at Harry with uncharacteristically expressive eyes. "Let me give you mine."

"What?" Harry said, interrupting his movement of stirring the pan. "No, it's *your* birthday, you idiot."

"I don't care, as a fair exchange. I can't just take this from you," Tom insisted.

"You're not taking it, I gave it to you," Harry said, rolling his eyes fondly. He handed Tom his new mug, pushing it into his hands.

"Won't you—I don't know—*miss it*?" Tom asked with an oddly pinched look.

"It's in good hands," Harry replied easily, "if I ever want to see it, I'm sure you'll let me."

"I don't know," Tom said, a grin starting to form on his lips, "I might hoard it like a dragon, this is a very precious treasure."

Harry's heart fluttered, his stomach squirming. "You do strike me as the dragon type—or maybe a magpie."

“Thank you,” Tom said with a pleased smile, taking the oddest things as compliments. “Are you sure you don’t want my copy?” he asked seriously after a short silence.

Harry shook his head. “It means a lot to you, I know Hamlet was your dream role. I don’t want you to give that to me out of the obligation of a fair exchange.”

“Alright,” Tom said, “thank you, Harry. I genuinely appreciate this—a lot.”

“You’re welcome,” Harry grinned, boldly setting a hand on Tom’s knee briefly, long enough to squeeze it affectionately.

He lost Tom for the rest of the day after that. He became quiet, nose buried in Harry’s copy of *Hamlet*. In the library he spent hours pouring over the book, thumbing over every annotation Harry had added, squinting to decipher the messy handwriting as if he were deciphering old inscriptions in a historical building. As if it were a true treasure he wanted to know the intricacies of.

“You can ask me if you can’t make something out,” Harry offered at one point, looking up from his own book when he caught Tom holding his book upside down, inches from his face, his eyes narrowed.

“No,” he’d replied absentmindedly, “I want to discover it all myself.”

Harry only laughed, charmed. He caught Tom folding some corners in the book, as if marking them for later.

Time trickled by and before he knew it, it was almost six o’clock, and they’d have to leave for the restaurant before long.

“Shall I go in the shower first?” Harry asked in the silence. “We’ll have to go soon.”

“You can do,” Tom replied, setting the book down, his finger propped between two pages. “I’ll go in after, give me a shout when you’ve finished.”

“I will do,” Harry said, getting up and leaving. He glanced over the bannister once he was on the first floor landing, smiling fondly at the picture Tom made, so intent on the book.

As they got ready, the silence extended. They did so separately, Harry realising it was the longest they’d been apart since the holidays began. It felt an awful lot like getting ready for a *date*. Harry had promised to dress up for the occasion, and he was going all out.

He pulled on a pair of his nicest slacks, the pretty leather belt Sirius had bought him slotting around his waist. After trying on the majority of his wardrobe, leaving all the shirts out on his bed, he settled for a bold choice: his sheer black shirt. He looked *good*, the trousers hugged his form perfectly (his arse looked really good), and the shirt was exceptionally flattering. Outside of the whole see-through thing, it accentuated his waist, and gave his back a nice silhouette.

He wasn’t quite sure what kind of jacket he wanted to wear for the walk to the restaurant, he even rifled through Alphard’s wardrobe but didn’t find anything. Eventually he decided he’d

just throw his leather jacket over the shirt, even if it wouldn't look great and he'd probably be cold.

Much to his post-act embarrassment, he even coloured his waterline in with some black pencil eyeliner, to accentuate the whole black ensemble, effectively bringing his eyes out as well as making his hair look less out of place.

He stared at himself in the bathroom mirror for *ages*, debating whether he should rub the eyeliner off and just change, worried he'd seem ridiculous, like he was trying too hard. Right when he was about to do just that, Tom called him.

"Harry!" he shouted, from downstairs by the sounds of it. "We need to go if we've got to be there for half seven!"

"Coming!" Harry called back, catching his eye in the mirror again. He gave himself a quick nod, a nervous lump forming in his throat.

He tried to appear as confident and nonchalant as he could as he opened the bathroom door and forced himself to go downstairs instead of back to Alphard's room.

"Are you ready then?" Tom asked, his back to Harry as he arrived in the library. From what Harry could tell, Tom looked incredible. He was wearing *very* flattering black slacks and a black shirt that made his shoulders look even broader than they were.

"Yeah," he said faintly.

"Good, because—" Tom stopped short as he turned around, his eyes widening.

Harry fidgeted horrendously, feeling a bit sick. "Do I look weird?" he blurted out. "I know I said I'd dress up but is this too much? Do I look stupid?"

Tom visibly swallowed but Harry didn't know if that was a good or bad sign, especially when he remained mute. "No," he said eventually. "No, no, God no, you look—you look great."

"Really?" Harry asked, looking down at himself, a blush spreading across his cheeks.

"Really," Tom confirmed, and Harry felt the weight of his gaze on him like it was made of lead.

"Thanks," he said shyly, busying himself by putting on his shoes and pulling his jacket on. "You look really good too. Very handsome," he added with a smile.

"Thank you," Tom said, standing up a bit taller while he straightened his shirt out. He sent Harry a very charming smirk, his eyes raking along the length of his body. "You look gorgeous," he said, the sincerity and softness of his voice startling Harry.

"Oh," he said, feeling his blush spread all along his neck and chest, butterflies squirming in his stomach. "That's—thank you," he stuttered out, fighting the urge to mess with his hair or bite his thumb.

Tom only smiled as he put on a fancy jacket before holding an arm out. “Come on then,” he prompted, holding his arm out a bit more pointedly.

Harry blinked, quickly stepping forward and taking it with shaking fingers. *Surely this isn’t actually a date*, he thought as he passed an arm through Tom’s and they stepped out into the cold. The word ‘*gorgeous’* was bouncing around his mind in Tom’s deep voice, making it very hard for him to focus on anything other than Tom’s arm in his.

The heat in his cheeks did recede though as the cold started to sink in, leaving place to a pink flush because of the icy air. He clutched Tom’s arm harder than he should’ve, the cold tightening the skin of his ribs almost painfully. There was no barrier between the freezing air and Harry’s skin; his jacket was open (it couldn’t close), and his shirt might as well have been non-existent.

“Are you cold?” Tom asked, sounding amused. Harry nodded, curving in on himself a bit. “You should’ve worn a jumper or something, for the walk at least.”

“Hm, starting to see that now,” Harry replied with chattering teeth. “Wish we had a car.”

“Me too,” Tom said, still sounding amused. “Can you drive?”

“Yeah, I got my licence when I turned eighteen,” Harry said, looking up at him, “can you?”

He nodded. “I have my licence too, got it when I was seventeen.”

“First try?” Harry asked, grinning up at him, trying to forget how the wind whipped against his skin.

“Yep, you?” Tom said, looking smug.

“Me too,” Harry replied, smirking up at him, the same smugness radiating off them.

“Don’t tell the others,” Tom said conspiratorially, tugging Harry a bit closer, “they’ll hound you to drive them about. None of them know I have my licence.”

“Do none of them have theirs?” Harry asked, surprised.

“Rick does,” Tom said, “but he made the mistake of telling the others.”

Harry laughed, shaking his head. They arrived at the village, warm light emanating from the lampposts strewn along the main alley. There was a small layer of snow that had formed over the cobbled path over the last few days, and it crunched under their steps. Most shops were already closed, their storefronts dark, but others were full of life, light and laughter pouring out.

The restaurant came into view as they walked along, a red awning lining the wall with the name of the restaurant in white print along the front. Plants decorated the outside, and despite the fact that most were frostbitten and dead, they were still pretty.

They shared a smile as they got to the door, and Harry let go of Tom's arm. Tom opened the door for him, ushering him inside, his own cheekbones flushed pink from the cold. The heat from inside prickled Harry's skin, making him shiver, before it settled over him like a blanket, allowing his muscles to relax.

Inside, the restaurant was dimly lit, the tables were lined with white cloth, while the walls and carpet were a muted red, dark like blood but not as vibrant. It all felt very *romantic*.

"Hello!" the hostess greeted, smiling at them. It was the same woman Harry had made the reservation with.

"Hi," he said happily, "reservation for Harry Potter?"

"Oh, *oh*," the woman said, recognition flashing across her face, "I didn't recognise you, dear! Gosh, don't you look lovely."

"Oh, thank you," he said, blushing up into the roots of his hair. "You look quite dashing yourself," he added with a wink when he overcame his surprise. He'd learnt that the best way to deflect a compliment was to dish one out himself.

"Oh, oh," the woman said, looking flustered, swatting in Harry's direction, "lovely boy." She looked back down to her book while Tom's hands settled on Harry's shoulders, almost pressing himself flush to his back. "How about the table in the corner over there?"

"That sounds perfect," Tom said, his voice echoing right in Harry's ear.

She nodded, smiling at them both before leading the way over to the table. Harry pushed Tom forward, hoping to catch the hostess's eye to know whether his dessert plan had fallen through or not. As Tom got seated, the hostess stood behind his chair and gave Harry an inconspicuous thumbs up, making him grin as he sat himself down.

"Right, can I get you boys anything to drink?" she asked as she came back into Tom's line of sight.

"Red wine?" Harry proposed, looking at Tom.

He nodded, looking over the wine menu. "A bottle of Bordeaux, please," he said with a charming smile.

The woman nodded. "I'll get you that then, boys."

"Thank you," Harry said as she turned and left, leaving them alone. It was a daunting thing, to suddenly be alone in a restaurant with only Tom for company.

"Do you always flirt with restaurant staff?" Tom asked with a raised eyebrow, looking amused.

"I wasn't *flirting*," Harry said with a laugh, toying with his napkin. When Tom only looked unconvinced, he sighed. "You know I don't know how to take compliments, so I just deflect."

Tom narrowed his eyes. “You better not have been deflecting when you called me handsome.”

Harry laughed, surprised. “Maybe I was a bit, but I still meant it. Obviously.”

“Obviously,” Tom echoed, looking smug. He also looked devastatingly handsome, but that was nothing new. “You should take your jacket off,” he said, “or you’ll be even colder when we go back out.”

“Oh, you’re right,” Harry replied, shrugging the leather jacket off and draping it over the back of his chair.

The hostess came back over as Harry turned back to the table, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Here you are, boys,” she said, setting two wine glasses in front of them along with a bottle of wine. “Are you two from up in the school?” she asked as she poured their glasses.

“Yes,” Tom replied politely. He was very good at talking to people, always polite and charming, despite him not being himself *at all*. “We’re seventh year theatre students.”

“Oh, actors,” the woman said, looking impressed. “You know what? I think our cook was saying something about a production he went to see in early December, was that you?”

Harry laughed. “If it was *Hamlet*, then yes.”

“I’ll have to ask him,” she said with a smile. “Give me a call when you’re ready to order, okay?”

“Thank you,” Harry said, watching as she left. He turned back to Tom, picking up his glass and holding it up in his direction with a grin.

Tom rolled his eyes but picked his own glass up, clinking it into Harry’s. “Cheers,” he said with a smile.

“Happy birthday,” Harry said before taking a sip of the wine. He looked around the restaurant as he set his glass back down, trying to ignore the nervous squirming in his stomach. There were quite a few other people in the establishment; a group of four women, friends, Harry assumed; an elderly couple sitting by the window; a large table of seven, a family if he had to guess. There was a young couple out on a date, and another group of young people, presumably out to celebrate the new year.

“Hear that?” Tom asked.

“Hear what?”

“The piano,” Tom clarified, and Harry realised there was piano playing from somewhere in the restaurant, near the bar, he thought. “Who is it?” Tom asked with a smirk. “I’ve played this for you, you should know.”

Harry laughed, coming up blank. “Are you serious? Are you just gonna quiz me on classical music whenever you want?”

“It’s a prime learning opportunity,” Tom said with a shrug, his lips turned up in an amused smile. “Well then? Who is it?”

“You’re so annoying,” Harry said with a laugh, shaking his head. “I don’t know, okay?” he admitted.

Tom seemed even more smug. “I’d assumed as much. I see you’re not very concentrated during our lessons.”

Harry snorted, leaning forward. “It’s a bit difficult to concentrate on learning to play the piano when I’m drunk while we do it. It’s your fault for having us drink so much.”

“Oh, it’s my fault you can’t remember a composer’s name?” Tom said with a raised eyebrow, sniffing haughtily.

Harry smiled, shaking his head fondly. “Who is it then? You tell me.”

Tom tapped his fingers on the table along to the music, almost absentmindedly, as he smiled. “Satie’s *Gymnopédie*, number one.”

Harry sat back dramatically. “I knew it!” he exclaimed.

Tom shook his head. “No you didn’t, liar.”

“You shouldn’t have said anything,” Harry said with a grin, waving his hand in the air, “I would’ve gotten it.”

“You’re such a liar,” Tom said with a laugh. “Come on, pick something,” he instructed, handing him a menu, “I’m starving.”

“Did we eat today?” Harry asked as he unfolded his menu.

“Er—I can’t remember,” Tom said with a frown.

“Me neither,” Harry said, “probably means we didn’t.”

“Didn’t we share a packet of crisps at one point?”

Harry frowned in thought, trying to remember. “Maybe,” he conceded. As he studied the menu he realised just how hungry he was, and everything sounded delicious. “What are you thinking of going for?”

Tom hummed, tapping his finger to his bottom lip absentmindedly. “I’m not sure, I can’t decide.”

“Me neither, what are you stuck between?” Harry asked.

“The lasagna, and the pasta with the mushroom and white wine sauce.”

“Me too,” Harry said, “how about this, we each order one of the dishes and then we swap. Then we get to try them both. What do you think?” He hadn’t actually been hesitating between those two particular dishes, but everything looked so good, and at least Tom would get to try the two he wanted.

“Yeah,” Tom said, looking slightly taken aback. “That sounds good, which one do you want to get?”

“Er—how about I get the lasagna and you get the pasta, then we’ll swap.”

“Fine by me,” Tom said with a smile, taking a drink and folding his menu back up. He called the waitress over and they both ordered their dishes, Harry hunching over a bit to mute the rumbling of his stomach.

They drank their wine as they waited, chatting idly about this and that. Harry wondered if it was the effect of the chapel, of the solitude they were forced into, that made it so easy to talk to one another. But, apparently that wasn’t the case. It was just Tom. The restaurant melted away as they talked, and laughed, and teased one another. Harry’s nerves evaporated, leaving place to the quiet buzz of happiness he felt in Tom’s presence.

When the dishes arrived, they’d already drank half of the bottle of wine, their cheekbones red from it.

“Thank you,” Harry said happily as the waitress set his food down. It smelled incredible, and his stomach rumbled in response. Tom only gave her a smile, very obviously biting back the laughter threatening him at something Harry had said before the food had arrived.

“We’re still swapping, right?” he asked as the waitress left.

“Yeah,” Harry replied, “yours looks just as good as mine.”

“Agreed,” Tom said, eyeing both dishes.

And then they were silent for a while as they ate. It was absolutely delicious, and Harry fought to not scarf it down like a starving man. Knowing he had to share half with Tom helped.

“I don’t know if I can let this go,” Tom said when he had roughly half of his dish left.

“Hand it over,” Harry said with a laugh. “I know you want to try this lasagna.”

Tom looked torn for a second before he begrudgingly held his plate out, taking Harry’s from him. “This had better be incredible.”

Harry grinned, digging into the pasta. It was really good, and he gave himself a pat on the back for thinking of sharing. They were silent again as they ate. It was an implicit rule they had that when they ate something good, they shut up.

“That was…” Tom drifted off, setting his knife and fork on his plate and picking up his glass of wine, “absolutely divine.”

Harry snorted as Tom exhaled contentedly. “I’m glad it was to your liking, my liege.”

Tom grinned, shaking his head. “Don’t be a twat.”

Harry laughed. “Express yourself normally then.”

“I did, it’s not my fault the intricacies of the English language are lost upon you.”

“You’re just being an idiot,” Harry said, grinning like an idiot himself.

Tom rolled his eyes. “What did you think anyway? Which one did you prefer?”

Harry exhaled heavily, as if facing a complicated dilemma. “They were both incredible. But, maybe I preferred the pasta? No, I don’t know. What about you?”

Tom hummed. “I can’t decide.”

“Good job we got to have both then,” Harry said with a grin.

“Yes, very good idea,” Tom said with a nod. “You can be promoted in my royal court, if you wish.”

“What are you on about?” Harry asked with a laugh, finishing his glass of wine.

Tom picked up the bottle and shared the last of the wine between them. “My royal court,” he said, as if that clarified anything. “Obviously I would be King, Theo would probably be my advisor—”

“Who am I?” Harry asked incredulously. He was torn between complete disbelief at whatever nonsense Tom was spewing and heart aching fondness.

“Currently court jester—”

“*What*?” Harry whisper-shouted with a laugh. “You’re kidding me.”

“I am offering you a promotion,” Tom said diplomatically. “You can be an advisor, if you wish. Though I do require you to also maintain your duties as court jester. You can be very entertaining.”

Harry stared at him, in complete disbelief but also so terribly endeared. “What are you on about?” he repeated with a laugh. “You’re so weird—and also, I wouldn’t be a court jester.”

“I might have had a bit too much wine,” he admitted with a sheepish grin. “But go on then, humour me, who would you be?”

Harry smiled, playing with the hem of his shirt as he thought about it. “I’d be a rival King from another kingdom. We’d be rivals but secret friends.”

“There are no rival kingdoms in this universe,” Tom said with a scoff. “I am the sole ruler.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I mounted a secret rebellion against you then.”

Tom gasped. “You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, I would,” Harry assured. “But I would cry as I killed you, don’t worry.”

“You’d *kill* me?” Tom asked, aghast.

“It would be utterly tragic,” Harry said, swirling his glass.

“How would you kill me?”

“I’d stab you,” Harry replied without missing a beat, amused at how interested Tom was. “Sword through the heart.”

“Very dramatic,” Tom said with a satisfied grin. “I would, of course, have anticipated your attack on my life and would have prepared for your plan to backfire.”

“No, I don’t think you would, we were very good friends in this universe,” Harry said, very aware that they weren’t making much sense.

Tom leant forward in his seat. “No, because what you don’t know is that I suspected you’d betray me from the very beginning, and I tasked Alphard to spy on you. Unbeknownst to you, he reported all of your plans back to me,” he said seriously, speaking of how good of an actor he actually was.

Harry stifled a laugh, mirroring Tom’s seriousness. “But what *you* don’t know is that Alphard actually became loyal to me, and he told me about your little plans. So, I sent him back to you with false plans.”

“Oh, but I suspected Alphard’s loyalty had shifted so I—”

“How was it, boys?” the waitress asked as she got to their table.

Harry sat back again, blinking in Tom’s direction and doing his best to hold in the laughter threatening him. Tom looked to be in the same predicament. “It was lovely,” he said, clearing his throat, “really, really good. Compliments to the chef.”

The hostess grinned. “I’ll be sure to pass it on. I’m assuming you’ll be having desserts,” she said, giving Harry a conspiratorial wink.

“Yes please,” Harry replied with a grin of his own.

She picked their plates up and hurried off, leaving Tom frowning.

“What—she didn’t even ask us what we wanted for dessert,” he said, looking confused.

Harry grinned. “She doesn’t need to.”

Tom’s gaze sharpened, looking over at Harry with a frown. He studied him for a second, undoubtedly taking note of how smug he must have seemed. “What have you done?” he asked warily.

“Nothing,” Harry said with a bright laugh to match the guilty grin on his face. “You’ll see, you’ll love it.”

“Harry, if the staff comes out singing happy birthday I’ll leave, I’m not joking,” Tom whispered, looking genuinely distressed.

“Oh god no,” Harry said, laughing in earnest. “It’s nothing like that, please don’t worry.”

“You promise?” Tom pressed, still in some amount of distress. “Because I can’t cope with anything like that.”

“I promise,” Harry said, tapping his foot into Tom’s under the table. “I’m not going to lie, they offered to do something like that but I said no. I knew you wouldn’t like it.”

Tom’s eyes flicked over his face, his distress melting into something like shyness. “Okay, what is it then?” he asked, curiosity shining in his eyes.

Harry laughed at the change. “You’ll see.” He caught sight of the waitress exiting the kitchen and coming towards them with two plates behind Tom, and he bit back his grin.

“Here you are boys,” she said brightly, setting the plates down. “I hope it’s to your liking, and,” she added, leaning towards Tom and whispering, “happy birthday.”

Harry watched as Tom blinked in surprise. “Thank you,” he said faintly, almost mechanically, to the waitress who left with a smile. He looked down at the dessert, eyes wide. “You did this,” he said, looking up at Harry.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Harry said, the grin creasing his eyes contradicting the statement. The dessert smelt lovely, warm and cinnamon-ey. “Try it then,” he urged when all Tom did was stare at him.

Tom shook his head in something like disbelief before picking his spoon up and trying it. His eyes fluttered shut and Harry couldn’t take his eyes off him, an excited thrill running through him at knowing Tom liked it.

“Good?” he asked anyway, just to have verbal confirmation.

“So fucking good,” Tom mumbled, a blush coating his cheeks.

Harry dug in too, doing his best to wrench his eyes away from Tom even though they kept flitting back over. “Oh fuck, this is really good,” he said after the first bite, having not put much thought into what *he* would think of it. “You’ve got really good taste in desserts.”

“I know,” Tom replied with a grin.

They finished their desserts quietly, Harry so focused on Tom he barely savoured his. When they’d done, he half expected Tom to start licking the plate—wondered if he *would* if he were alone.

Instead, he set his spoon down delicately and took a sip of wine. He wouldn't meet Harry's eyes, shifting in his seat a bit. "I'm not really sure what to say," he murmured after a while.

"Why do you have to say anything?" Harry asked, propping his chin on his hand.

"Well," Tom said with a sigh, "you did all this for me. I'm not sure what to do with that."

Harry laughed lightly, endeared. "As long as you enjoyed it, I don't care what you have to say about it, to be honest."

Tom laughed, shaking his head. "I'm very grateful," he said quietly, his finger toying with the rim of his glass. "And I had a lovely time."

"Well then," Harry said happily, "what more can I ask for?"

Tom hummed, and he looked so incredibly attractive in the dim light of the restaurant, the warm red tones making him and his sharp jaw, and his black outfit, stand out.

Harry smiled. "What do you want to do after? Do you want to go back to the chapel?"

"I don't know," Tom replied. "Did you have anything in mind?"

Harry shrugged. "We could go to the pub across the road. Have a drink there before going back."

"Why not," Tom answered, finishing his wine. "It's still fairly early."

"Hi!" a man said as he sidled up to their table, the chef by the looks of his apron. "You're the kids from up in the school, right?"

"That's us," Harry said with a bemused smile after glancing at Tom.

"Brilliant," he said, looking between them. "I came to your show earlier in the month and you were amazing, theatre's a bit of a hobby of mine," he admitted, looking sheepish. "Listen, I'd love to buy you a drink, I get off in twenty minutes, would you come to the pub with me?"

"We were just gonna go there, actually," Harry said, bemused. "So, yeah, we'd love to."

"Oh, brilliant!" the man said, looking delighted. "I'll meet you there then shall I? Oh, and how did you like the apple crisp? It's for you that I made it, right?"

"Yes, thanks so much for doing that," Harry said with a grin. "It was delicious."

"It was very good," Tom said with a tight smile.

"Oh good," the man said brightly. "Well, I'll call the check over for you, and then I'll meet you at the pub."

"Okay, brilliant," Harry replied, waving lightly as the man left.

“Entertaining fans now, are we?” Tom said, giving Harry a look.

Harry laughed. “Come on, don’t be like that. It’s the least we can do, he did make that dessert special, you know?”

“At your request.”

“Well, yeah,” Harry said, rolling his eyes. “And, we’re going to the pub anyway. I’m not gonna say no if he wants to buy us a drink.”

“Hm, fair,” Tom conceded, nodding reluctantly.

“Here’s your check,” the waitress said as she came over, “I hope you had a lovely time.”

Harry snatched the paper up before Tom could glance at it, rooting through his pocket for some cash. “It was lovely,” he said honestly as he counted some notes out. He handed her sixty pounds, the total being just over fifty seven. “Keep the change,” he added, before handing her another ten pound note, “and that’s for you, you were wonderful.” He gave her a bright smile, ignoring Tom who was probably baulking at him.

“Oh,” the woman said, looking taken aback, “oh, thank you so much, dear. That is very generous.”

“You’re welcome,” Harry said kindly, taking the receipt from her.

“Well, I’ll hope to see you soon then, lads, good luck with your coursework,” she said, smiling at them.

“Thank you,” Harry said, returning her smile.

“Yes, thank you,” Tom echoed, getting up and shrugging his jacket on.

Harry did the same, though he only picked his jacket up. They were only walking across the road, after all. “And happy new year,” he said with a grin.

“You too, love,” the hostess said brightly.

Harry waved at her as he and Tom left the restaurant, stepping out into the freezing air. “Oh god,” he said, wrapping his arms around himself, “fucking freezing.”

Tom turned around and stared at him. “Give me all the money you have on you,” he said.

Harry stopped, laughing in surprise. “Are you mugging me?”

Tom frowned at him before a reluctant smile etched itself across his face. He shook his head, looking amused. “No I’m not fucking mugging you, you idiot. You’re just not paying for anything else, that was a lot more than I was expecting.”

“What?” Harry said with a laugh, wishing they’d just get to the pub to get out of the cold. “No, it’s your birthday, *you’re* not paying for anything.”

“Well in that case I don’t want to go to the pub,” Tom said petulantly, crossing his arms across his chest.

“We already said we’d meet the guy there,” Harry said pointedly. “So get walking to the pub, ‘cause I’m freezing.”

“I don’t want you to buy me any drinks,” Tom stated, looking serious.

“Tom,” Harry said with a sigh, “please just accept that it’s your birthday. I insisted on taking you out for your birthday, so it’s only normal for me to pay. Stop being weird.”

Tom huffed. “Let me buy you a drink.”

“No,” Harry laughed. “Now come on,” he grabbed Tom’s arm, tugging him across the road, “I’m not arguing with you in the cold.”

Tom was grumbling behind him but Harry only tugged harder, dragging him over to the pub. He pulled the door open and stepped across the threshold, beckoning for Tom to follow and closing the door behind them.

It was a small pub, the decor slightly outdated. The benches were torn in places, the interior a forest green. It was warm and loud in the place, and there were only men, older men, inside. Clearly they were regulars all out celebrating the new year. Some looked at them as they entered, frowning in confusion, as if they’d disrupted their routine.

“Hi lads,” the barman greeted as they walked up to the bar, “what can I get for you?”

“Two whiskeys, on the rocks,” Tom said, tapping the bar, glaring at Harry from the corner of his eye.

“Right, a preference?” the barman asked, looking at Tom.

“Jameson,” he replied. The barman nodded, turning to make their drinks. When he handed them over, he eyed Harry curiously, eyes drifting down his chest.

“Thank you,” Harry said quickly, picking up his glass to go over to a booth in the corner.

Tom followed, shrugging his jacket off as they sat down. “Was the barman checking you out?” he asked with a frown.

Harry laughed nervously. “I think so,” he said uncomfortably, his nose scrunching up.

“Creep,” Tom said, rolling his eyes.

“Maybe he just thought I was dressed weirdly,” Harry said with a shrug.

“Dressed weirdly or not, which you’re not,” Tom said pointedly, “you look good. I doubt he was just looking at the shirt.”

Harry hummed, hiding his grin at having Tom compliment him *again* by taking a sip of his drink. He was definitely blushing though, so he occupied himself by looking around the pub. There were a couple of the pub residents sending glances their way, but others were laughing and chatting loudly with one another, the atmosphere putting a smile on Harry's face.

"Oh, look," he said, pointing to the other side of the pub where an upright old looking piano stood. It looked kind of out of place, standing in the middle of the pub, alone. "You could play," he said brightly, turning back to Tom with a hopeful smile.

"Absolutely not," Tom replied immediately.

"Why not?" Harry asked, embarrassed by the whiny quality of his voice. Maybe he'd had a bit too much to drink already.

"I only know classical music," Tom said pointedly, "and I doubt these lot enjoy that."

"I don't know," Harry said, "any music's better than none."

Tom smiled at him. "We have to wait for the chef to come anyway. And we don't even know if you're allowed to play the piano. It might just be for decoration."

"Hm, maybe," Harry said, hiding his disappointment. He loved it when Tom played the piano.

They chatted quietly for a while, their argument from outside ultimately making a reappearance, though Harry got the sense they were only fake arguing, both of them having to bite back their stupid grins.

Not long after, the door opened, letting in a gust of cold air, and the chef from the Italian restaurant appeared. Harry watched as he greeted many of the other men, slapping each other on the back and exchanging boisterous jibes. He spotted Harry and Tom though and made his way over, gesturing to the barman who nodded. He must have been a regular.

"Hi, fucking freezing out there, innit?" he said, sitting down in the booth next to Harry.

"It is," Harry agreed, spinning his glass on the table.

"I'm Mark, by the way," the man said, smiling at them, "thanks for agreeing to come."

Harry smiled at him. "I'm Harry, and this is Tom."

"You played Hamlet, right?" Mark said, looking at Tom who nodded in assent. "Ah, I knew it, and you played Horatio?"

"Yep," Harry said.

"Well, you were both brilliant," Mark said brightly. The barman came over and set his drink on the table, Mark nodding in thanks.

"You said theatre was a hobby of yours," Harry commented, "do you play?"

“Oh no,” Mark said, shaking his head. “I enjoy watching though, I go to most of the school’s productions. My daughter, Rose, loves it too, I think she’d like to attend the school when she’s old enough.”

They dissolved into chatter, Mark telling them all about his daughter and asking endless questions about the school. He talked at length about their rendition of *Hamlet*, telling them how excited he’d been when he’d seen that that was the play they were doing. Tom explained what the rest of the year had in store for them, and Mark seemed endlessly excited about their end of year play.

“This is gonna sound strange, boys, but I’d love your autograph—” Mark said sheepishly as the clock edged towards half past eleven. They were already three glasses of whiskey in— “I’m sure you’re both gonna be really successful, and you’re really very nice lads. It’d be nice to have a memento of today.”

“‘Course,” Harry said happily, having grown quite fond of the man. “Do you have some paper and a pen?”

Mark looked thrilled as he pulled the paper and pen out of his bag, handing it over to Tom first, who smiled and scribbled his name in his pretty cursive. Harry took it and wrote a quick *Harry James Potter, thanks for the apple crisp, it was delicious*.

Tom tutted as he read what Harry wrote. “I seem like a right twat now.”

Harry laughed, a bit loud for how drunk he was. “What ‘cause you just signed your name?”

“Yeah, give me that,” he said, taking the pen and adding ‘*it really was lovely*’, under what Harry wrote. He handed it over to Mark after who seemed thrilled.

“That’s right, whose birthday is it anyway? I didn’t think to ask,” Mark said, looking between them.

“It’s Tom’s,” Harry said happily. “But don’t sing, he doesn’t like it,” he added in a conspiratorial whisper, his words slightly slurred.

“Noted,” Mark laughed, while Tom rolled his eyes. “I think it warrants another round though?”

“I’ll go!” Harry exclaimed, shuffling past Mark quickly.

“Harry—” Tom started but Harry was off, already halfway to the bar.

“Another round?” the barman prompted with a smile.

“Yes please,” Harry said with a grin. “And also, are we allowed to play the piano?”

“That old thing?” the barman asked with a laugh, gesturing to the piano. “Yeah, ‘course. Do you play? We have some sheet music if you need.”

“I don’t,” Harry said brightly, “well, not very well at least, but my friend does!”

The barman laughed. “Well, if your friend wants to play he’s welcome to,” he leant over the bar, whispering to Harry as if telling him a secret, “none of these old plonkers can play, but I bet they’d love it.”

Harry laughed. “Brilliant, I’ll try and get him to play then.”

“Alright then lad, here you go,” the barman said, handing him the drinks with a wink.

Harry went back to the booth, doing his best to not drop any of the glasses or spill anything. He opted to sit next to Tom instead of Mark, grinning up at him when he was met with a suspicious look.

“What have you done?” he asked.

“We’re allowed to play the piano,” he said brightly.

Tom sighed. “I’m not playing.”

“Please,” Harry said, looking up at him through his lashes, “please, it’d be fun.”

“They’re not going to like classical music, Harry,” he replied apologetically. “It’ll only annoy them.”

“I’m sure they’ll like it,” Mark interjected, looking excited. “No matter what you play, it’s a bit of novelty, innit?”

“Exactly!” Harry exclaimed, nodding along.

“Harry, I’m drunk,” Tom said with a laugh. “I’ll just mess up the keys.”

“You play drunk everyday!” Harry argued.

Tom rolled his eyes and groaned. “Okay, two songs, *maximum*, okay?”

“Brilliant!” Harry said excitedly, getting up. “Do you mind, Mark? We’ll not be long.”

“Go ahead,” Mark said happily. “I’d love to see you play, and I’ll go and see some of the lads.”

Tom took the hand Harry was holding out for him and slipped out of the booth, standing on unsteady feet. “Fuck,” he muttered, blinking, “I’m sloshed.”

Harry laughed, a few heads turning for how loud he was. “It’s your birthday, you’re supposed to be! Come on.”

They made their way over to the other side of the room, Tom sitting on the stool in front of the piano, setting his glass on it, while Harry went to the other side, leaning against the piano.

“What d’you want me to play?” Tom asked, looking up at him expectantly.

Harry hummed in thought. “How about *Rêverie*? That’s a nice one.”

Tom closed his eyes and groaned. “You overestimate how good I am.”

“Go on then,” Harry said with a grin, leaning more heavily on the piano.

Tom gave him a look but his fingers were already on the keys, and when he looked away he started playing. The piano didn’t sound as good as the one they had in the chapel, but it wasn’t bad either, and Tom really was a brilliant player.

Harry watched him as he played, loving the way he bit his lip in concentration. The pub fell quiet after a minute, and Harry spotted Mark watching with bright eyes. Some of the pub’s patrons had their eyes closed, cradling their pints as they listened.

When he finished he looked up at Harry and said, “That’s one, what’s your second, *and last*, request?”

Harry laughed, but before he could answer, the men in the pub were clapping, drowning out any sound he could’ve made.

“Ey, lad! Lad! Play *Fairytale of New York*!”

The man’s request was met with raucous encouragement, and Tom looked up at Harry with wide eyes before turning to the rest of the pub. “I’m terribly sorry,” he said, “but I don’t know how to play that one.”

“I have it!” the barman shouted, clearly delighted at the entertainment. “I have the sheet music! Hold on, it's in ‘ere somewhere.” He disappeared behind the bar, rummaging through folders.

Harry grinned as Tom sighed.

“Ey, we haven’t had a sing along in ages, lads!” one of the men shouted to his friends.

“Oh god,” Tom murmured, loud enough for only Harry to hear, making him laugh.

“Will you sing, Tom?” he asked, amusement colouring his voice.

“Absolutely not,” he replied, “I don’t sing.”

“Shame, we could’ve done a duet,” Harry said, snickering.

“You’ve already got me playing, what more do you want?” Tom said with an eye roll. “By all means, though, please sing along.”

“No, I don’t think I will,” Harry said petulantly.

“Oh come on,” Tom insisted, taking a drink. “You have to, I agreed to play.”

Harry stuck his tongue out at him in lieu of a response, delighting in the laugh it got out of him.

“Here you are,” the barman said as he traipsed over, handing Tom an old looking piece of paper. “It’s a pub favourite.”

“Thanks,” Tom said absentmindedly, setting it against the piano as he looked it over quickly. “Okay,” he said, nodding to Harry before he started playing, the men whooping before quietening down.

They all burst into song and Harry laughed at Tom’s wide eyed look. He didn’t stop playing though, and Harry grinned at the happy atmosphere.

“You’re supposed to be singing,” Tom prompted, raising an eyebrow. Harry was in awe at how effortlessly he played.

Harry rolled his eyes but indulged him. “*They’ve got cars big as bars, they’ve got rivers of gold, [...]*.”

Tom was grinning as he played, laughing lightly at Harry’s theatrics to go along with the song.

The men in the bar couldn’t have been happier, singing louder as Harry joined in with them from his perch on the piano.

“*You promised me Broadway was waiting for me*,” he sang, gesturing in Tom’s direction through his grin. “*You were handsome*.”

He was surprised though, to see Tom mouth the following lyrics at him, *“You were pretty, Queen of New York City*.”

He laughed, delighted at Tom playing along with the duet, even if he wouldn’t sing.

“When the band finished playing
They howled out for more
Sinatra was swinging
All the drunks they were singing
We kissed on a corner
Then danced through the night.”

The men in the pub were shouting the lyrics, all holding each other by the shoulders and swaying to the piano. Harry laughed as he watched them, singing along with Tom mouthing the lyrics silently.

“*You scumbag, you maggot*
You cheap lousy faggot
Happy Christmas your arse
I pray God it's our last.”

Tom narrowed his eyes at him as he sang those words, lifting a hand from the piano long enough to stick up his middle finger at him, making Harry fall into uncontrollable giggles. Tom finished the song, a smile pulling at his lips from Harry’s cheek.

“Tom! Tom! Get these lads another round, on me!” one of the men shouted when the song was over, and Harry understood the barman was called Tom, clearing up the confusion. He and Tom shared a laugh as they both realised what was going on.

“Hiya, can you play *Stop the Cavalry*? It’s me favourite Christmas song,” another one said as he came up to them with a grin.

They were served another round and Tom the barman provided the sheet music for the man’s request, sending the patrons into another round of impromptu karaoke.

“Oi!” the barman shouted after that song. “Happy New Year everyone! Free round for you all!”

The announcement was met with loud cheers, the atmosphere in the pub positively celebratory.

“Happy New Year,” Harry said, his words slurred, turning to Tom who was finishing his previous drink.

“Happy New Year, Harry,” he replied with a broad grin, looking up at him with bright eyes.

Harry’s heart pounded in his chest, leaning a bit heavier on the piano. His eyes were heavy with drink, his limbs slightly numb. He desperately wanted to kiss him. New drinks were presented to them though, and Harry’s foggy mind latched onto that instead of snogging Tom stupid.

They ended up staying for another hour, Tom having to play many Christmas songs in that time, the pub filled with the drunken singing of all the men present. Some came over to sing along next to Harry, and new drinks seemed to appear as soon as they finished the previous ones.

“I’m sorry lads but the pub's closing,” Tom the barman announced just after one in the morning.

The men grumbled and complained loudly, though it was all in good fun.

“Come on then,” Tom said to Harry, standing up and swaying dangerously, making Harry laugh like an idiot. They were both supremely *hammered*.

“Mr. barman!” Harry called, stumbling over to the bar with Tom in tow. “How much do we owe you?”

“Er—let me see, lad,” the barman said, looking over a sheet of paper. “You only have four rounds to pay for, so that’s twenty quid. Ten each.”

“Perfect,” Harry said, fishing for a twenty pound note in his pocket.

“No,” Tom said, slapping at Harry’s hand. “No way, put your fucking money away,” he slurred, “you’re not paying for anything else.”

“Will you shut up,” Harry said with a laugh, pushing at his chest. “It’s your fucking birthday, you can’t pay for anything!”

“Oh! Did I hear it’s piano man’s birthday?”

Harry baulked as the men burst into song, singing ‘happy birthday’ to a horrified Tom. Harry burst out laughing as Tom covered his face with his hands, the tips of his ears turning pink. He joined in with the singing, naturally, finding himself under one of the men’s arms.

“Alright, alright,” Tom called as they finished, waving his hands in the air. “That’s enough, you come here,” he said, pulling Harry away from the man. “But thank you all,” he said stiffly.

In Tom’s embarrassment Harry managed to slide a twenty pound note over to the barman, hooking his arm with Tom’s and pulling him towards the exit after collecting their jackets. “Come on then,” he said happily over the chatter of the men leaving the pub.

“You’ll be okay getting back to the school, won’t you boys?” Mark said as he sidled up to them with a bright grin.

“We’ll be fine,” Harry assured. “It was lovely meeting you Mark, I hope your daughter gets into the school.”

“Cheers, Harry. And thank you both for a brilliant night, happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year!” Harry exclaimed happily, Tom echoing the sentiment behind him.

They left the pub, everyone shouting variations of ‘*goodbye*’, *‘goodnight*’, and ‘*happy new year*’ at them.

Once out in the cold air Harry laughed, feeling so utterly happy. He was immediately whisked under Tom’s arm and hauled along the road.

“Did you have a good birthday?” he asked brightly. His eyes wouldn’t focus properly, and they were definitely stumbling along the road, holding onto each other like idiots.

“The best,” Tom slurred, holding Harry into his side with a strong arm. “Though I don’t think I’ve ever been so drunk, how many drinks did we actually have?”

“I stopped counting after five,” Harry said, laughing.

“Plus the bottle of wine with dinner,” Tom said, his foot catching on a stone in the road, making them stumble forward. They pulled back up, laughing. Harry’s left arm went around Tom’s waist, clutching at the material of his jacket, while he was still nestled under his arm.

“Did you really have a good time? Even though they sang happy birthday to you?” he asked, looking up at him.

Tom smiled down at him, coming to a stop under one of the lampposts. “I had the best time,” he said, sincerity colouring his words. “And it wasn’t even my birthday when they sang to

me, that has to be bad luck," he mumbled, making Harry laugh. He smiled again, pulling Harry just a bit closer. "Thank you," he whispered in the space between them, which had grown much shorter, "for the best birthday I've ever had."

Harry swallowed, his eyes drifting down to Tom's lips. His hands had found their way onto his chest, creeping slowly up to his shoulders. "It was my pleasure," he managed to whisper, looking back up to Tom's glazed over eyes.

They were going to kiss, Harry was sure of it. Tom was definitely leaning down a bit further, and his hands on Harry's waist had tightened. Harry licked over his lips, heart kicking up as Tom's eyes drifted down to the motion.

And just as Harry was about to lift himself up onto his tiptoes and kiss him once and for all, Tom went stiff, the glaze in his eyes receding.

"You payed for the fucking drinks," he whispered, voice accusatory. He pulled back, standing up straighter while he glared down at him, though he still held onto him with a gentleness that made Harry's heart melt. "I was so embarrassed I didn't even pay attention, you sneaky sneaky wanker."

Harry blinked up at him, the breath knocked out of him in a long exhale while his head spun at the change. He laughed nervously, nodding.

Did I imagine it? he wondered as Tom shook his head and scolded him for paying, whisking him back under his arm and pulling him towards the school.

Harry shook himself. He couldn't believe he'd almost kissed Tom because of his muddled drunk mind. He almost *ruined* such a perfect night, such a perfect friendship, because he'd had too much to drink and was imagining things. Obviously Tom's actions were drink induced.

"Will you shut up about the fucking drinks?" he said with a laugh as he tuned back into the conversation. "It's twenty quid, who gives a shit?"

"*Me*, you idiot," Tom said, squeezing Harry into his side. "You're a twat."

"So you've said," Harry giggled, pinching his waist. Tom grumbled under his breath but Harry ignored him, happy to just stumble along the road with him.

Tom started humming *Fairytale of New York* at some point, and it was so endearing Harry couldn't help the grin that spread across his face. He picked up where Tom was humming and sang along into the night, his words merging together because of the alcohol.

He could hear Tom laugh as he hummed along, before he was swept into a dance, startling him.

"Tom!" Harry exclaimed, laughing as he stumbled. "We're too drunk to dance, we'll fall over."

“No we won’t,” Tom said with a grin, pulling Harry into him as he danced him along. “I promised I wouldn’t let you fall, remember? Now come on, sing the song.”

He was so charming Harry let it happen. “I think you said you wouldn’t drop me, not that you wouldn’t stop me from falling.

“Shush, sing the song,” Tom urged with a grin. His eyes were filled with such childlike delight that Harry laughed and picked the lyrics of the song back up, Tom humming along as he danced them across the grass. It was bitingly cold out, but, despite their breath coming out in a white mist, their cheeks were flushed and warm. They danced across the snow like idiots, leaving a truly incomprehensible trail of footprints behind them, the only light that of the moon shining high in the sky.

They were already back at the school, stumbling across the grounds in their semblance of a dance. Harry missed lyrics and stumbled over others, laughter cutting through most. Tom was laughing as well in between hums, catching them repeatedly as they almost went tumbling.

True to his words, they didn’t fall.

Their laughs echoed throughout the grounds, loud in the silence of the night. There were lights on in the castle, casting them in a very faint glow for how far away they were.

Harry was breathless by the time they got to the chapel. “Fancy a dip in the lake?” he asked with a giggle as Tom fumbled with the key to the building.

“Absolutely not,” Tom laughed, finally getting the door open and ushering him inside. “The only place I want to be right now is in bed.”

“Tired?” Harry asked with a yawn of his own, the heaviness that had been weighing his eyelids down manifesting itself. They hung their jackets up and Harry toed his shoes off. The tips of their noses were red because of the cold, and their breaths came in short as they waited for the heating to warm them up.

“Shattered,” Tom replied, kicking his shoes off.

“I’m going in the bathroom first,” Harry announced before running off up the stairs.

“Harry—” Tom called, running after him.

Harry was gasping on giggles as he got to the bathroom, too breathless for a proper laugh. The race had been useless anyway as they tended to share the sink.

Tom pinched his waist as he joined him in the small space before grabbing his toothbrush. They brushed their teeth together, knocking into each other with their hips and sticking their middle fingers up in the mirror.

“Don’t forget to wipe your makeup off,” Tom said as he wiped his mouth of any toothpaste.

“Oh shit I’d forgotten,” Harry said, looking in the mirror and noticing the black had smudged under his eyes.

“Here,” Tom said, wetting a cloth with some warm water. He leant against the sink and beckoned Harry forward, tilting his chin back. He took his glasses off for him, setting them on the sink. “Close your eyes,” he whispered.

Harry did so, feeling warm water touch his eye a second later. He leant against Tom as he wiped the black from under his eyes gently. It took a few minutes but it was nice, and he got to hold onto Tom’s hip to steady himself.

“That’s it,” Tom said once he’d finished, wiping a stray drop of water from Harry’s cheek with his thumb.

Harry opened his eyes, drying his face on a towel hanging from the hook on the door. “Thank you,” he said, “I always hate doing that.”

“You’re welcome,” Tom said happily, setting his hand on the small of Harry’s back, guiding him out of the bathroom.

Once they were in their room, Harry unbuttoned his shirt and slipped it off his shoulders, discarding it on the floor. He did the same to his trousers and socks until he was in his boxers.

“We need some water,” Tom commented, unbuttoning his trousers. “We’ll have a killer hangover tomorrow,” he said with a laugh.

Harry winced, scrunching his nose up. “I’ll go get some,” he said.

He left the room and came back a few minutes later with a big glass of water, having already drunk some in the hopes to lessen the hangover. When he got back, Tom took the glass from him, taking a sip and depositing it on the nightstand. He’d stripped down to his boxers, and Harry couldn’t help the way his eyes drifted to his arse.

“Okay, time for bed,” Tom said as he turned back around. He smiled at him and took a step forward, reaching out until his hands held his face between them. Harry sucked in a breath, having not expected the touch. “Thank you,” he whispered, “for everything.”

Harry’s hands reached out blindly, finding the bare skin of Tom’s stomach. It was so firm and he couldn’t help the way his fingers traced along the skin lightly, feeling along, making his own stomach tighten. “You’re welcome, it was my pleasure,” he managed to whisper, swallowing around his desperate *want*.

Tom smiled, leaning down until his lips landed on his forehead, pressing a soft kiss there that made Harry’s eyes flutter closed. “It was lovely.”

Harry took a deep breath, his hands having found purchase on Tom’s waist. “It was,” he agreed.

Tom pulled back, his fingers tracing along Harry’s jaw before falling away. “Come on then,” he said with a smile. “The others are coming back tomorrow, remember?”

Harry’s heart dropped, realising very suddenly that their holiday was over. He reached out blindly and grabbed Tom’s hand in his, earning a curious look. “I had a great holiday,” he

blurted out, trying to quell the horrid feeling rising up inside him.

Tom's eyes softened, and he stepped closer again, wrapping him in his arms. Harry went willingly, pressing his face into Tom's bare chest, his arms wrapping around his back. "Me too," he murmured. "These were the best holidays I've ever had."

Harry's breath stuttered, his arms squeezing just that bit tighter. "You'll come to mine for Christmas next year, won't you?" he said, hating how small his voice was. He knew how ridiculous he sounded, it wasn't like they were parting ways or anything.

He felt Tom's smile against his hair. "Of course," he replied. "Can I stay for my birthday as well?"

"'Course you can," Harry said happily, feeling some of the lead weight lifting from his chest. *Stay forever*, was what he wanted to say.

"Brilliant then," Tom whispered, pulling back. They looked at each other, still so close, and Harry kept his feet firmly planted on the floor, refusing to give in to the temptation of kissing him.

It was Tom who leant down with a smile, pressing a small lingering kiss to his cheek. Harry's breath caught in his throat, his fingers flexing against Tom's skin, but he was quick to turn his head just enough to smack a kiss of his own on his cheek, reciprocating the gesture. It was like a strange version of the way French people greet one another, '*la bise*', and the absurdity of it put a smile on Harry's face.

There was an identical smile on Tom's face as he pulled back, and they laughed when they caught each other's eye. The sound of their laughter was loud, making Harry realise just how quiet it had been beforehand.

"Okay," Tom said, clearing his throat around a laugh. "Bed, now, before…bed."

Harry nodded, biting the insides of his cheeks to temper down the force of his grin, his heart fluttering in his chest.

Their fingers ended up interlaced as they turned to their beds, and they only let go reluctantly when they went to crawl into their respective beds. Harry *almost* proposed they sleep together, as they had done on Christmas Eve, but he knew they'd already overstepped some kind of line, and he didn't want to push his luck.

"Night, Tom," he whispered, tiredness hitting him as he snuggled up to his pillow.

"Night, Harry," Tom murmured, shutting off the light.

The room spun a bit once Harry was laying down, but he managed to take a couple deep breaths to ward off the sickness threatening him.

Like he had most nights, he fell asleep to the sound of Tom's breathing.

— Scene seven —

Harry was no stranger to waking up on the first day of the year with a horrific hangover, but this one really took the cake.

He woke up because he was cold, but he was also sweating horrendously, his mouth was dry, his head pounding, and his stomach roiling. He groaned in discomfort as soon as he was aware enough to do so, feeling absolutely awful.

“You okay?” came Tom’s rough voice from the other bed.

Harry peeled his eyes open, wincing in the onslaught of sunlight. “Feel sick,” he mumbled.

“Hm, I feel like shit,” Tom said, groaning as he turned onto his side to face Harry. “I’m fucking freezing too,” he added, pulling the quilt higher up.

“I’m cold too,” Harry said, his voice cracked. “Did we forget to put the timer on the heating?”

“I think so,” Tom replied, sighing into his cover. Harry couldn’t see much of him, but the tip of his nose was red from the frosty air and he seemed to be shivering.

Harry groaned as he sat up, tiredness still tugging at him. His stomach lurched and he sucked in a breath, closing his eyes to stop the dizziness. When the room settled, he took a drink of water to chase away the dryness in his mouth and looked back over at Tom who was peeking out of his quilt. “Watch out,” Harry said with a smile, getting up on unsteady feet and climbing into Tom’s bed.

“What are you doing?” Tom grumbled with a laugh.

Harry climbed over him, trying to ignore the protesting in his stomach, and settled into the bed against the wall. “Let me in,” he mumbled, tugging at the quilt wrapped firmly around Tom. “I’m here to warm you up, sorry if I’m a bit sweaty.”

Tom laughed as he opened the quilt up, letting Harry shuffle closer to him until their bodies were pressed together. Tom really was freezing, and Harry shivered when their skin made contact. He pushed down on Tom’s shoulders, urging him down. It was a bit suggestive but that really wasn’t his intention, he only wrapped his arms around Tom’s shoulders, holding him into his chest as their legs tangled, Tom’s left arm winding around his waist.

“Is that better?” Harry asked, burying his nose in Tom’s hair, his fingers tracing patterns on his shoulder blades.

Tom hummed, rubbing his nose against his collarbone. “You’re so warm,” he mumbled, the sound muffled against his skin.

Harry smiled, bringing a hand up to run his fingers through Tom’s hair, scratching lightly.

Tom made a sound low in his throat, shuffling closer to him, and Harry had to inconspicuously angle his hips away just a bit. “I’m gonna fall asleep like this,” Tom murmured.

“It’s only half ten,” Harry said quietly, loving how soft Tom’s hair was between his fingers, “we can sleep a bit longer.”

“Okay then,” Tom replied faintly. He moved about a bit more, pressing closer still, as if he were trying to absorb all of the heat emanating from Harry. He ran his hand down his back, across his hip, until he could hold onto his thigh, hiking it up until his leg hooked around his waist.

Harry let it happen, not breathing. For someone who kept his distances with everyone, Tom was awfully cuddly. He managed to get a grip on his hammering heart and his very interested cock after a few seconds, and relaxed into the cuddle.

He could feel Tom’s chest rise and fall against his own, and could feel his soft breath tickling his throat. His hand had returned to Harry’s back and was tracing little patterns at the small of it, the touch lulling him into sleep.

He continued to stroke through Tom’s hair and across his shoulder blades, but soon his own breathing evened out, and he dozed off.

He didn’t fall back asleep per se, but he dozed, slipping in and out of fifteen minute increments of sleep. Every time he woke up he clutched onto Tom just a bit tighter, making sure he was still there.

Tom, for his part, was fast asleep. He was so soft in sleep, he looked so peaceful. His eyelashes rested prettily on his cheeks, his muscles slack, his hair mussed up, curling softly. His skin was warm and smooth, and Harry couldn’t stop running the pads of his fingers along his back.

When he noticed it was past twelve, he knew he wouldn’t be going back to sleep, so he just basked in the cuddle. He held Tom in his arms, stroking along his skin and through his hair. His leg was still hooked around Tom’s hip and he made sure to keep it there, keeping him wrapped up.

He wondered idly when the last time Tom had been cuddled like this was. When the thought of the answer being ‘*never*’ crossed his mind, he held on a bit tighter.

The others weren’t meant to get back until the evening, all of them coming all the way from London, so they could stay in bed all day if they wanted.

Tom made a small noise, burrowing closer into his neck, and Harry’s heart melted with nothing but affection. He couldn’t quite believe the position he was in, but his mind was too foggy to think about it too hard, so he contented himself with twirling Tom’s hair between his fingers.

“What time is it?” Tom mumbled against his skin, making no move to shuffle away.

Harry smiled. “Almost half twelve.”

Groaning, Tom held on tighter.

“Feeling better?” Harry whispered, nosing at his hair.

“My arm’s numb,” he grumbled, “and I need to piss.”

Harry laughed, endeared by his grouchiness. “Go to the bathroom then.”

“No, m’too comfy.”

“I thought your arm was numb?” Harry said, amused.

Tom groaned again, sighing heavily. He pulled back a few seconds later, rubbing at his eyes. His cheek was red where it had been pressed against Harry’s shoulder for so long, and Harry grinned at the sight. “I’ll be back in a minute, don’t move,” Tom said as he twisted out of bed, standing up on unsteady legs and padding out of the room.

I wouldn’t dream of it, Harry thought as he watched him go. He drank some water while he waited and allowed himself to sniff the pillow under his head, his eyes fluttering shut at how much it smelt of Tom.

He reappeared a couple minutes later, and Harry smiled at the sight of him; hair mussed with sleep, eyes heavy lidded. He climbed back into bed, and immediately curled up around Harry, his cold skin sending shivers down Harry’s spine.

“How do you cool down so fast?” he asked with a hiss when Tom’s fingers touched the ridges of his spine.

“I don’t know, it’s like my body can’t retain heat,” he mumbled. “Warm me up.”

Harry laughed, wrapping his arms back around him belatedly. “You’re grumpy this morning.”

“Worst hangover I’ve had in my life,” Tom grumbled.

“Drink some water,” Harry said, stroking a hand through his hair gently.

Tom lifted his head away from Harry’s neck and nodded. “Okay,” he said, holding a hand out.

Harry chuckled, reaching over to the nightstand to grab the glass of water, rolling Tom onto his back in the process. “Here you go,” he said, amused, as he handed him the glass.

He had to sit up to take it, and he didn’t look happy about it in the slightest.

“Are we staying in bed all day then?” Harry asked as Tom slumped down on his back once he’d set the glass back down.

“Yes,” Tom replied, wrapping an arm around Harry’s shoulders and tugging him down into his side.

Harry curled up there, throwing an arm across Tom’s waist. “We’ll have to get up at some point. It would not be in our favour if the others found us in bed together,” he said as casually as he could. “In our underwear, no less.”

Tom laughed lightly, his fingers catching on the ridges of Harry’s spine as he trailed them up and down. “It is a bit incriminating, I’ll admit.”

Harry hummed, splaying his hand over the flat plane of Tom’s stomach, just because he could. They stayed like that for a while, chatting quietly or lapsing into silence, drifting off to sleep for a couple minutes at a time.

They moved about as the afternoon wore on; on their backs, Harry tucked under Tom’s arm; Tom sprawled on Harry’s stomach, Harry’s fingers in his hair; on their sides, Tom wrapped around Harry’s back, or the other way around. It was incredibly intimate, and Harry really didn’t think it was normal for friends to spend the day in bed together.

But what did he know? It was lovely and he wasn’t going to pass up the opportunity to get to cuddle Tom, even if it was detrimental to his embarrassing infatuated state.

At three o’clock, Harry ventured downstairs to turn the heating on and make them some coffee that they drank in bed.

“We should start getting ready,” Harry said faintly around five o’clock, his head resting on Tom’s shoulder while he lounged on his back, Tom’s arm around him. He traced feather light touches along the veins in his forearm, which Tom seemed to enjoy.

He hummed in response, sounding reluctant. “I suppose so.”

“Would it be awful of me to say—”

“I don’t want them back either,” Tom said with a smile, cutting Harry off. “It’s so quiet and peaceful.”

Harry grinned, shaking his head. “We’re awful people.”

“I don’t care,” he replied, rolling onto his side to trap Harry in his arms. “You’re staying in here, aren’t you?” he said into Harry’s hair.

“In your room?” he asked, his hand trailing along Tom’s back.

“Yeah.”

“Do you want me to?” Harry asked, just because he wanted to hear the answer. He rubbed his nose against Tom’s chest, shuffling closer.

“Yes,” Tom whispered, caging Harry in with his leg as well as his arms.

Harry laughed, holding on tighter. "'Course I'm staying, I'm sure Alphard won't mind."

"You'll have to move your stuff over, I can help," Tom mumbled, fingers catching in Harry's hair.

"We'd have more room if I left some stuff in there," Harry commented. He already had a large portion of his wardrobe in Tom's room along with some books and notebooks.

"Better to have all your stuff here," Tom said simply.

"Okay," Harry replied, happy to just have Tom want him in his space.

They stayed like that for a while longer, long enough for Harry to start drifting off into sleep. He caught himself though, and shook himself awake, pinching Tom's side. "We have to get ready," he said pointedly, a yawn tearing through him.

Tom groaned, trying to tuck him back against his chest.

Harry laughed, fighting free of Tom's grasp. "I'm not having Theo barge in here with us cuddling. We'd never hear the end of it."

"I don't give a shit," Tom said, trying to pull him back down.

"No, no," Harry said, swatting at his hands, "we need a shower. Do you want to go in first?"

"I *want* to go back to sleep," Tom replied, managing to grab Harry by his waist, pulling him closer until they were pressed flush.

"Tom," Harry complained, melting into the embrace despite himself, "we really need to get ready."

"Five minutes," Tom whispered in his ear. "Just five more minutes."

Harry sighed, nodding against his collarbone. The five minutes turned into ten, but Harry didn't say anything. In fact, when Tom pulled back he almost begged for another five minutes, but he didn't.

"Do you mind if I go in first?" Tom asked, propping himself up on his elbow. Harry ended up on his front, face smushed into the pillow, and he shivered when Tom traced his spine with a finger.

"No, go ahead."

"Okay," Tom said quietly, "I'll be back in ten minutes."

Harry watched him get up and grab a towel, feeling oddly cold. When Tom left the room, he wrapped himself up in the quilt, surrounding himself with the smell of him. The bed was so warm from the time they'd been in it, and Tom's imprint was still present in the mattress. Harry felt choked up on the contentment he felt in his bones.

His mind flashed with images of their almost kiss as they'd walked back from the pub, of their dancing, of Tom wiping the makeup from his face, of the cheek kisses they'd exchanged.

Maybe…Harry thought tentatively, *maybe Tom fancies me back?*

It wasn't an outlandish thought, not with all the evidence to back the statement, but it made his cheeks burn, uncertainty squirming in his stomach.

It was a possibility, but Harry knew he wouldn't do anything about it. Everything he and Tom had shared throughout the holidays went beyond what he was willing to sacrifice for a kiss or just to get off.

Tom came back not long after and Harry was forced to shelve his thoughts. He brought the smell of soap with him, but Harry could only focus on how he was only wearing a towel that was hanging precariously low on his hips. He dearly wished he had his glasses on so he could catch a glimpse of the deep V of his stomach without the blur.

"Your turn," Tom said, holding onto the towel so it didn't fall.

Harry felt very reluctant to get out of bed, wanting to see Tom drop the towel. "I'm very comfy," he said, snuggling back up into the pillow.

Tom laughed, coming over to the side of the bed and pinching Harry's toes through the cover. He was holding onto the towel so that it didn't slip, but with him being closer Harry could make out the lines of his stomach, the protrusions of his hips.

He licked his lips, scowling when he caught himself doing so. "Okay, I'll go." He stumbled out of bed, shimmied past Tom, and grabbed a towel from the back of the door.

His shower cleared away the lingering remnants of his hangover, and the hot water felt lovely. When he got back to their room, Tom was dressed, much to Harry's dismay.

"Close your eyes," Harry said as he rifled through his wardrobe for a pair of boxers.

"Oh, right," Tom said after staring at him for a second.

Harry blushed into the roots of his hair as he dropped his towel. He glanced at Tom who had his hands covering his eyes and he smiled, finding him adorably ridiculous. He was quick to tug on his boxers though, unwilling to stand naked with Tom in the room despite the thrill it sent through him.

"Okay you can open your eyes again," he said with a laugh. He looked through his clothes, even though he knew he'd just be opting for a random pair of joggers and Tom's (now his) jumper. He mixed it up a bit and pulled on one of Sirius's old t-shirts before covering it with the hoodie.

"Shall we go downstairs?" Tom asked, looking dismayed at the notion.

Harry smiled at him. “It’s best, yeah. They’ll be here soon, we might as well welcome them. I can make us some food, how about that?”

“Oh, do we have what we need to make that garlic bread you made last time?” Tom asked, looking slightly more happy with the idea of leaving their room.

“I think so,” Harry said, hoping to god they did. “How about we have some chips with that—I think we’ve got some potatoes—and there’s that steak, right? I can make a pepper sauce to go with it.”

“Sounds lovely,” Tom said with a smile, leading the way downstairs. “What do you want me to do?”

Harry grinned, checking through their cupboards. “You peel potatoes, I’ll chop. We’ll do the chips first, then the garlic bread.”

Tom nodded before disappearing, leaving Harry to get all the ingredients out. He came back a minute later, the soft sound of classical music sounding out from the library.

“Do you only like classical music?” he asked curiously, handing the peeler to Tom. “I’ve never thought to ask.”

“More or less,” Tom said with a shrug. “I like the odd modern song, but I’d always choose classical. What about you?”

Harry laughed as he started chopping the potato Tom handed to him. “I play the guitar, with a strong preference for the electric guitar,” he said pointedly. Tom only looked at him curiously, so Harry clarified his statement by saying, “I like rock.”

“Oh,” Tom said, looking surprised, “do you really?”

“Yep,” Harry said with a grin. “I’ll show you at some point, I actually miss the electric guitar, it’s very fun.”

“Yes you’ll have to,” Tom said faintly, “although I don’t like rock, not really.”

Harry smiled. “That’s okay.”

“I’d like to see you play though,” Tom said offhandedly, and Harry’s heart did a funny thing that made him feel giddy.

They made dinner together, only for the two of them as they had no idea what the others would be doing, and they didn’t have enough ingredients to feed seven. And, it felt like they were clinging onto their last moments of being alone.

They ate at the table in the library, the record player playing in the background. Tom ate most of the garlic bread, at Harry’s insistence because he knew how much he loved it. It was lovely, and just as they were setting their knives and forks down, the door opened.

They shared a quick smile, one last secret between them, one last private moment.

“Oof, it smells brilliant in here!” Theo exclaimed as he crossed the threshold, already breaking the peaceful quiet with his loud voice and the chaos he spread wherever he was. He looked over at them with a bright smile. “Have you just eaten?”

Harry got up, accepting the quick hug Theo gave him. “Yep, I hope you’ve eaten too, there’s nothing left.”

The others piled in behind him, and Harry gave them all a hug, happy to see them again despite feeling weird about other people being in what he perceived as his and Tom’s space.

“We had McDonald’s an hour ago,” Alphard said, grinning brightly as he hugged Harry.

“But whatever you had smells much better,” Gaspar said, sniffing the air.

Rick shut the door behind himself, closing out the cold air.

“How have you both been?” Abraxas asked as they piled around the table after tucking their luggage against the wall. None of them hugged Tom, he didn’t even bother getting up.

“Good,” Harry answered for both of them. “How come you’re all here at the same time? Did you come together?”

“Rick drove us,” Theo explained. “We thought it’d be best, instead of getting the train or having our parents drive us.”

Harry shared an amused look with Tom, understanding why he had to keep his driver’s licence a secret.

“Whiskey?” Rick proposed.

“God no,” Harry said with a shudder, his stomach clenching at the thought.

Tom cringed, looking a bit pale as he shook his head. “Not for me either.”

“I will do, Rick,” Theo said before looking between them both. “What’s wrong with you two, did you do something for the New Year?”

“You could say that,” Tom mumbled.

“We’ve been recovering all day,” Harry said, his foot tapping Tom’s under the table.

“Oh, what did you do?” Alphard asked curiously.

“We went to eat in the village,” Tom said after clearing his throat. Harry’s heart clenched horrendously, feeling like he’d been slapped at the change in Tom’s demeanour. Gone was the casual Tom who lounged about all day in comfy clothes. The marble statue was back, and it was heart-wrenching.

“Oh, really? That’s nice,” Theo said, looking taken aback.

“We went to the pub after,” Harry added, trying to swallow down his disappointment. He couldn’t even console himself with the fact that Tom was only himself around *him*, because he already missed him too much. “Did you lot do anything?” he asked, trying to steer the conversation away from them.

They all took turns recounting their holidays. They’d all attended a couple parties, but it had mostly been family time. It sounded nice, and Harry found himself hoping Sirius and Remus had had a good Christmas.

“Well,” Theo started, glancing at all the others, “I heard, through the grapevine, that Tom’s playing the piano. What’s that about?”

A hush fell over the table and Tom rolled his eyes. “You really need to get a hobby,” he sniped, and Harry smiled.

“This is my hobby,” Theo said. “Gossiping about my friends. It’s my favourite hobby.”

“You act as if me playing the piano is revolutionary,” Tom said, a certain edge to his voice that Harry barely recognised.

“I never asked,” Harry said, Tom’s attention snapping to him, “why did you ever stop?”

He sighed. “They make such a big deal out of it. I just proposed something to Dumbledore for a play, a piano piece I’d written, and he rejected it. It put me off playing for a while, that’s all.”

“Oh, right,” Harry said faintly, having not expected that. “Will you play it for me?”

Tom raised an eyebrow, his lips quirking up only the slightest bit. “Why not,” he said with a shrug. “One day.”

Harry smiled over at him.

“I brought what you asked for anyway, Tom,” Gaspar announced.

“What was the bargain about?” Abraxas asked curiously.

“It was stupid,” Harry said with a grin.

“I was hoping Harry would pick a song I already knew, so it didn’t turn into this spectacle,” Tom said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“What, Harry could pick any song he wanted and you had to play it?” Rick asked.

Tom nodded.

“In exchange for what?” Theo asked, unable to quell his curiosity.

“Harry’s teaching me how to play the guitar,” Tom explained halfheartedly, “in exchange for me teaching him how to play the piano. So, I asked him to do a particular song, which he did,

and in exchange I offered to play whatever song he wanted."

"This is fascinating," Theo said, propping his chin on his hand and looking between them.

"Well, I can't wait to hear Tom play," Gaspar said, looking excited.

"I'll do it later," Tom said. He pushed his chair back, looking at Harry. "Glass of wine?" he asked, heading towards the kitchen.

"Er—yeah, I can probably stomach that," Harry replied with a smile.

As Tom disappeared into the kitchen, Theo leant across the table. "Jumper, piano, wine—"

"Are you speaking to me in keywords?" Harry asked with an incredulous laugh.

"I have so many questions," Theo said desperately.

"And you'll have no answers," Harry said with a wry smile.

"Oh, he's rubbed off on you," Theo said, looking betrayed, "you've become evil, like him."

"Don't be stupid," Harry said, shaking his head while the others laughed.

"I gave the jumper to Harry for Christmas as I'd already basically given it to him anyway," Tom said, sounding bored, as he reemerged. "I was under the impression we'd covered the whole 'piano' subject, and I frankly do not know what you mean when you just say 'wine'. There are your answers, now stop being ridiculous."

"Thanks," Harry said as he took the glass Tom handed to him, laughing lightly.

Theo looked gobsmacked, the others looking between Harry and Tom almost compulsively.

"How did you like the er—the weed?" Theo asked tentatively after a few seconds. He very clearly didn't know how to tread, and it was very amusing to watch.

Harry felt his cheeks turn red as he remembered Christmas Eve, how he'd fallen asleep on Tom, how he'd carried him up to bed. "It knocked us out, alright," he managed to say.

"Really?" Theo said, looking interested.

"It really did," Tom said, amused. "We smoked two joints on Christmas Eve, had a four hour nap, and then Harry slept for twelve consecutive hours."

Theo burst out laughing. "You're kidding?" he gasped out while the others laughed along.

Harry shook his head. "No, it's true."

"Jesus, I'll have to tell Luna. She said she wanted feedback."

"And," Harry said, laughing as he spoke, "Dumbledore came to see us, just as we'd woken up from our nap."

Tom laughed, shaking his head. “He knew we’d been smoking, we were still really high anyway.”

“Oh my god, what did he want?” Alphard asked.

Harry recounted the interaction, the boys laughing at him and Tom. They jumped from topic to topic after that, Harry sometimes telling a story of their holidays when someone asked something specific. Tom was quiet for the most part, and Harry missed his witty banter.

“Okay,” Tom said with a sigh when the clock was edging towards midnight, “get me the sheet music Gaspar, then I’m going to bed.”

Harry lit up. “You’re gonna play it now?” he asked, grinning.

Tom rolled his eyes. “Yes, come on.”

Theo exclaimed something incomprehensible in joy while the others laughed, looking excited. Gaspar jumped up and went to rifle through his luggage, coming back to the table with a thick folder full of sheet music. He handed a piece of paper to Tom who took it apprehensively.

“Okay, come on,” he said after a few seconds of studying it. They all got up but Tom clicked his tongue, glaring at them. “Just Harry,” he said pointedly.

Harry grinned, following him over to the piano. The others didn’t look put out, they merely turned to watch from the table. “Where do you want me?” he asked, hovering beside Tom who had sat on the stool in front of the piano and propped the sheet music up.

He scooted over and tapped the place on the stool next to him, where Harry usually sat. Even if he’d sat there countless times already, his whole body pressed to Tom’s, he still blushed bright, knowing the others were watching.

“I’m not singing,” Tom said pointedly, turning to look at him. He had a bit of colour high on his cheekbones, and Harry wasn’t sure if it was from the wine or from the situation.

“Naturally,” he replied with a smirk. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Tom rolled his eyes again, his fingers resting on the keys of the piano. He took a quick breath before looking back at the sheet music and beginning to play.

Harry grinned, having not realised he’d asked for a pretty complicated song—to him it looked complicated, anyway. Tom’s fingers danced across the keys quickly, his eyes never leaving the sheet music, a small frown of concentration pinching his eyebrows.

Harry laughed as he heard Theo start to sing along to the lyrics, sounding delighted.

When Tom finished with a sweep of the keys—a *glissando*, Harry had been told—Harry clapped happily, grinning over at him.

“Well,” Tom said, looking at him, stretching an arm out to wrap around his shoulders, “worth it?”

“Definitely,” he replied, leaning into him. He absolutely loved watching Tom play the piano. “Play me something else,” he said boldly.

Tom cocked an eyebrow up. “Why don’t *you* play *me* something?”

“I don’t know anything,” Harry countered, scrunching his nose up.

“I’m starting to think these piano lessons are useless,” Tom said with a prim sniff, “you’re not learning anything.”

“I didn’t say *that*,” Harry said with a laugh. “Look, I know the beginning of Chopin’s *Prélude*, watch.”

He frowned in concentration—which was a difficult thing with Tom’s arm still securely around his shoulders—and placed his fingers on the keys, managing to do a choppy ten second rendition of what Tom called Chopin’s masterpiece.

“See?” he said with a grin.

Tom shook his head, biting back a smile. He removed his arm from around Harry and set to playing the song, his favourite piano piece. Harry listened, delighted. The piano keys resonated around the chapel, making it sound even more beautiful.

“Do you know what I’ve had stuck in my head all day?” Tom said with a cheeky smile once he’d finished playing.

“No, go on,” Harry said with a grin. Tom loved playing the piano, it was clear to see in his smile. And it was easy to momentarily forget that they weren’t alone, their backs to the others as they messed about at the piano like they had every night for over a week.

Harry’s heart fluttered when Tom started playing *Fairytale of New York*, a grin spreading across his face. He was immediately reminded of them dancing back to the school like idiots, singing and humming along to the song. He pointedly did not think about how they’d almost kissed.

Tom was humming quietly as he pressed the keys down. How he remembered how to play the entire song, Harry had no idea.

Theo came and handed Harry a joint silently, setting an ashtray on the piano. He smiled down at him, looking fond, before retreating back to the table. Harry smiled back at him, appreciative.

He smoked the joint while Tom played. His eyes had fluttered shut at some point, listening to the music reverberating around the chapel. When the last keys rang out, he opened his eyes again and grinned over at Tom.

He smiled back, plucking the joint from his fingers. “I can’t believe I can remember the whole thing,” he said as he exhaled the smoke.

Harry laughed, pressing down on a random key.

“Go on,” Tom said, nodding to the piano, “play something.”

“I’ve told you, I don’t know anything,” Harry said with a grin.

“‘Course you do,” Tom smiled, pressing a quick succession of keys that Harry recognised as *Claire de lune* by Debussy. “We spent a whole night playing this.”

Harry laughed. “You do realise that you playing while using my fingers to play, is still you playing, right?”

Tom smiled at him. “I’m training your muscle memory, here,” he said, picking Harry’s hand up and playing the first notes with him, his other hand occupied by the joint. “There, your turn.”

Harry sighed, amused. “You know I can only do the beginning, it’s too difficult otherwise.”

“That’s fine,” Tom said easily, “you play the beginning and I’ll finish it.”

“Okay,” Harry said faintly, a pleased smile pulling at his lips. He did his best to concentrate and play the beginning of the piece. His playing wasn’t as smooth as Tom’s, but he was okay, even if Tom had to swoop in and correct him when he pressed the wrong key.

True to his word, when it got to the more technical part, Tom took over, his arms crossing over Harry’s easily to take his place. He’d placed the end of the joint against the ashtray, so Harry took it and finished it while watching him play.

He clapped happily when Tom finished, the last notes ringing out.

“Thank you, thank you,” Tom said, doing a silly bow he did every night that always made Harry laugh. “Bed? I’m shattered.”

“Yeah,” Harry replied, coughing into his hand to chase away the cloying smoke in the back of his throat.

“You’re still as good as ever, Tom,” Gaspar commented with a smile when they turned back around.

“Thanks,” Tom said with a small smile. Harry assumed he appreciated the compliment from Gaspar, seeing as though he was *incredibly* talented when it came to playing all manner of instruments.

“So handsome,” Theo said dreamily, his eyes droopy from the weed, “and so talented.”

“Shut up,” Tom said with a laugh, walking around the table and flicking Theo’s ear. “Coming to bed?” he asked, turning to Harry who flushed bright red at the implication.

"*What*?" Theo asked, eyes suddenly wide and alert. "Is it happening? Oh my god—"

"No no no," Harry said quickly, waving his hands in front of him, burning under the wide-eyed stares of his friends. "No—I'm sorry, Alphard, I forgot to mention, I kind of moved into Tom's room. In the *spare bed*," he pressed, looking at each of them individually.

"Are you staying in there?" Alphard asked curiously, looking to be biting back a grin.

"I'm sorry, I hope you don't mind," Harry said apologetically.

"Oh no," Alphard said, his grin appearing, "I loved rooming with you but I'm never gonna say no to a room on my own. *And*—"

"There's no 'and'," Harry cut in quickly, seeing quite clearly what Alphard was trying to imply.

"Whatever you say, Harry," Alphard replied, holding his hands up.

Harry groaned at the looks he was getting. "You're all annoying."

"And you two are shagging," Rick said with a sly smirk, looking between him and Tom.

"No, no," Theo interrupted before either of them could say anything, "it's more romantic than just shagging. Have you kissed?"

Harry floundered, throwing his hands up in defeat before looking over at Tom who was looking very unimpressed, his arms crossed and eyebrows raised.

Tom sighed as he took in how embarrassed Harry looked. He set his hands on the table, catching everyone's attention. "Let me make this very clear," he said, looking at each of them in turn, "there is nothing going on between me and Harry. We are *friends*, and your accusations make, if not me, then Harry, very uncomfortable. So stop it, or I will make sure you have the most *insignificant* role in the play we are to write. Am I clear?"

Harry baulked, he'd never actually seen Tom threaten anyone, and while it wasn't full on mean and angry, more annoyed and tired, the others backed down immediately.

"Crystal," Theo replied, wincing. "We are sorry," he added, looking between them, "we don't do it to take the piss, it's just you'd really go well—"

"Ah, ah, ah," Tom said as if he were chastising a child, "I do not want to hear it. Shut up."

Theo hung his head. "Okay, sorry."

"We are," Gaspar said, looking genuinely apologetic, "even if there was something going on, it would be none of our business."

Harry smiled, feeling his violent blush start to recede. "Cheers."

“Quite right, Gaspar,” Tom said with a wry smile. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’ve been wanting to go to bed for the past hour.”

Harry smiled over at him, laughing lightly. He looked like a grumpy old man. “Right, come on then.”

“Night, lads,” Theo called as they made their way up the stairs.

“Night!” Harry said, leaning over the bannister and waving down at them. He turned back to Tom and said, “You can go in the bathroom first,” with a smile.

Tom stopped, looking like he was going to say something before he glanced downstairs and just smiled, nodding in Harry’s direction before heading to the bathroom.

He smiled as he watched him go, feeling a bit of a pinch in his chest. He went into their room and stripped down to his boxers, plodding about as he waited for his turn. Picking up Tom’s copy of *The Secret History,* he flicked through it, smiling at the annotations. He’d scribbled the meanings of the Greek words, as well as underlining parts of dialogue Harry would love to have his thoughts on.

“Your turn,” Tom said quietly as he stepped into the room, his hand finding Harry’s waist for the briefest touch.

Harry hummed as he set the book down, going to brush his teeth quickly.

When he got back, Tom said, “You can read it, if you want,” holding up the book he’d been flicking through, “if it’s the annotations you’re interested in.”

Harry grinned, his heart fluttering as he sat down on his bed, facing Tom in his. “I’d love to,” he said honestly.

Tom smiled and set it on the nightstand between them. “We’ll get your stuff in here tomorrow, now that Alphard knows. I’ll be able to have a proper snoop through your things.”

Harry laughed, surprised. “Yeah, okay,” he said with a bright grin, shuffling until he was laying in his bed. He took his glasses off once he realised he’d forgotten to do so, and dropped them onto the nightstand.

“Do you mind if I read for a bit?” Tom said, holding up Harry’s copy of *Hamlet* he’d given him.

Harry smiled into his pillow. “Go ahead,” he mumbled, feeling more tired than he had downstairs. He could hear the others chatting, and Tom flicking the book open beside him. He desperately wanted to go and crawl into Tom’s bed, but he didn’t dare.

When he heard Tom pull the cover over himself though, he couldn’t stop himself from whispering, “If you get cold like last night, you can come into my bed, I’ll warm you up. I won’t mind.”

He kept his eyes closed, and face firmly pressed into the pillow, embarrassed by his proposition.

Tom was quiet for a second. “I’ll keep it in mind,” he whispered back, though Harry couldn’t make out his tone. “Night, Harry.”

“Night, Tom,” Harry replied, swallowing.

— Scene eight —

“I do hope you all got the rest you deserve during your holidays,” Dumbledore said as they entered his classroom Monday morning.

It had been difficult to wake up that morning, as Harry was so used to waking up mid-morning at the very least. The alarm on the nightstand had gone off and both he and Tom had groaned, Harry had turned it off, knocking over half the things on the nightstand as he did so, while Tom buried further into his pillow. Harry had had to shake him awake ten minutes later, lest he miss the morning class.

The day prior they had moved all of Harry’s things into their room together. Tom had taken great pleasure in rooting through everything under the guise of organising it like he wanted. He snooped through every book, every notebook, every sketchbook, every photo, every trinket. Far from finding it irritating though, Harry found it endearing. The image of Tom sitting cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by Harry’s things as he not-so-subtly snooped, was something that would never fail to make him smile.

They’d been left alone for the most part, though Harry had had a couple conversations with Alphard, one about the infamous Sam that made Alphard blush into the roots of his hair. He caught up with all the boys individually at one point or another though, and he saw Tom chatting with Theo over a cup of coffee in the kitchen.

Despite the easy going Sunday, it was still weird to wake up Monday morning and traipse up to the castle for lessons.

“Now, I hope you are ready to partake in the culmination of your education here,” Dumbledore went on when they were all seated on the sofas. Harry had to actively fight himself to not snuggle up to Tom who had reverted back to wearing his fancy clothes. Harry, for his part, was buried under the thick layer of what he had dubbed *their* jumper, though he was wearing less casual trousers.

“We will not be seeing much of each other this term,” Dumbledore was saying, “as you will be working rather autonomously, which is one of the main reasons as to why you, as seventh year theatre students, get the luxury of private accommodation. I’m sure you are all to some degree familiar with the assignment I am about to hand out to you, but I will detail it anyway.”

Harry, despite his tiredness, listened eagerly.

“You are, from this point onwards, set the task of writing a play. While I will get into the logistics of that further on, you will also be directing this play, and you will design the set and the costumes. It goes without saying that, to do this, you have at your disposal the younger theatre students, who will gladly play secondary parts if needed and direct the stage while you play. You will also have the seventh year art students at your disposal for the construction of the set and the fabrication of costumes, do keep in mind that this is part of their final production as well.”

“To give you a brief timeline of events,” Dumbledore continued, “I would advise having the play written by the end of January, the auditions for any secondary roles finished by mid February as well as any and all designs you will need fabricating. That leaves the art students plenty of time to make everything you need, while you all start rehearsals around this time. You will, of course, have full access to the theatre. The only times you will not have are the mornings, as the younger students do also need to rehearse. You have all afternoons, evenings, and weekends at your disposal. Though, please be considerate and allocate an evening or afternoon here and there to the younger ones if they come and ask for it.”

“I can tell you all now that you will perform this play for two consecutive nights, on the 29th and 30th of June, and your performance will close the school year. If you are not ready at this time, you will, sadly, fail in getting your diplomas,” he said this quite gravely, and a stab of worry spiked in Harry’s stomach despite knowing they’d manage. He saw Tom scratch the dates down on a page of his notebook and smiled to himself.

“However,” Dumbledore went on jovially, “I have no doubt that you will succeed in this gruelling endeavour. It demands teamwork and trust, but I am sure you will make it work. I am sorry to say that you will not have us, your Professors, at your disposal. We will, like everyone else, discover the play on opening night. It is of utmost importance that confidentiality remains around your play, and you must impress upon this fact to the other students you will be working in close quarters with.”

“You can, however, seek our help, that is what we are here for. While we will not help with specifics, and you will only have an hour with each of us a week, you will be deciding your curriculum. If you include dancing, or sparring, or anything physical into your play, you may ask Professor McGonagall to allocate her lessons with you to that particular domain. If you wish to go over tragedies, or comedies, or romances, with me, you must only let me know. I do know that Professor Snape likes to keep a certain set curriculum, but if you need to speak about something in particular with him, pertaining to your play of course, or your creative process, he will be happy to do just that.”

Harry shared an amused look with Theo at that, unsure if Snape had ever been happy about anything in his life.

Tom raised his hand, ever the attentive student, and Dumbledore motioned to him with a smile. “So, we get to decide what we do in lessons? You don’t have any expectations for us in that regard?”

“Exactly, Tom,” Dumbledore said kindly. “The hour you have with each of us a week is an aid, if you will—an hour where you get to work with a Professor who can help you with whatever you need. And if you have nothing to bring up, then we can just chat. It is also a way for us to keep track of where you are in your work. I do expect to know when you have finished writing the play, when you finish auditions, and any other milestones, simply to make sure you are doing the work.”

“Is there a particular length we’re constrained to?” Abraxas asked after raising his hand. “A word count or page count, or run length?”

“Not particularly,” Dumbledore answered. “I would recommend for the play to be longer than an hour, but perhaps shorter than two. Though, you have full creative liberty. If you wish to make it thirty minutes, then so be it, but know that we will know if that is its length because of lack of work or because of creative intent.”

“Do we have to stick to any rules?” Alphard asked. “I mean, any particular writing rules.”

“No,” Dumbledore said simply. “Again, you have full creative liberties. Your play can have as many Acts as you wish, with as many scenes as you want. You can write in prose or in verses, though I would recommend the prose to make your writing process easier. You may write any genre of play you wish, though when you choose to do so you must respect the traditional rules of that genre. For instance, if you wish to write a tragedy, you must respect the rules of hamartia, anagnorisis, and peripeteia. The only information about your play you give me will be the genre you have chosen, to ensure that you have respected these key elements during your evaluation in June.”

“Okay,” Theo said pensively, “and is there a deadline for the publicity of the play? Like the posters and whatnot.”

“Ah, yes,” Dumbledore said, “I had forgotten. We will ask that you have a title for the play along with a poster design for the first of June. You understand though that this must be ready beforehand, because the first of June is the date by which you must start advertising the play.”

Harry slumped into the back of the sofa, his arm pressing against Tom’s. He was starting to get a headache with all the information being given, and he hoped the others were taking it all in because he couldn’t be trusted to remember everything.

“I do believe that is everything,” Dumbledore said after a short silence. “Are there any more questions?”

“Could we have the evaluation criteria?” Tom asked, twirling his pen over his fingers. “To break down how much you value the quality of writing, the set, the plot, the acting, and all that?”

Dumbledore smiled. “I would love to, Tom. However, we do not evaluate like that for your end of year play. Either you pass, or you don’t. We attribute distinctions in the same manner.”

“So there’s no mark, just either it was good enough to give us a pass, or it was rubbish?” Tom said, sounding slightly annoyed.

Dumbledore only smiled again. “While the technical aspect of this assignment is important, it is not everything. What we are trying to see is what you do with full creative liberties. Rest assured though, we do remain objective in our evaluation—whether we personally like the play or not does not impact it whatsoever.”

Tom hummed noncommittally. “Do you require a transcription of the play?”

“Yes, on opening night, each of us Professors would like a physical copy of the play,” Dumbledore answered.

“Will that be a copy with or without all the stage directions?” Theo asked.

“Only the text you would publish,” Dumbledore said, “if it were to be published, that is. So yes, there should be some stage directions, such as the entry of characters, but not your personal stage directions, no.”

“Do you have any specific requirements for the printing?” Abraxas asked.

Dumbledore smiled, seeming amused. “No, only that it is presented as a booklet and formatted coherently. The art department can aid you in the confection of the physical copies. I would recommend making one for each of you, as well.”

“Professor,” Harry said, raising his hand from where he was slouching on the sofa, “will our roles be accounted for in your individual evaluation? Because surely we can’t all be main characters, some of us are going to have to take on smaller roles.”

“Yes and no,” Dumbledore replied. “No, because we will not be penalising anyone who has a smaller role, simply for the fact they have a smaller role. Yes, because we will be taking into account how well you fill the role assigned to you.”

“Alright,” Harry said, not sure if he understood completely. As long as no one was getting slagged off because they had fewer lines, that was fine by him.

“Any more questions?” Dumbledore asked, looking around at them. They all shook their heads and he smiled at them. “Good, then I wish you all the best of luck for your endeavours, and do know that I am so very excited to see what you do for us. Now, I do have a mystery I need solving.”

They looked around at each other, perplexed frowns in place.

“What is it, sir?” Alphard asked curiously when Dumbledore failed to go on.

Their Professor smiled, his eyes twinkling. “You see, on the night of the New Year, just shy of two o’clock in the morning, I found myself looking out of my window to see two individuals waltzing through the grounds—”

Harry felt his heart stop, his face immediately flaming red.

“—and I do so hope this means you all had a good New Year’s?” Dumbledore finished, grinning.

“Oh God,” Tom mumbled from beside Harry, his cheeks pink when he turned to look at him.

“What?” Gaspar said, confused.

Harry tried to sink further into the sofa, hiding his face in his hands.

“Oh my god, it was *you*?” Alphard asked with a surprised laugh.

Theo laughed loudly. “What were you doing?” he asked on a gasp.

“We were just—” Harry started, waving a hand in the air by way of explanation. “You know,” he said vaguely.

“Drunk?” Rick supplied with a snort. “Hammered? Sloshed?”

“Yep,” Tom said, looking resolutely at the ceiling. He turned to look down at Harry, visibly biting back a grin.

“Your fault,” Harry mumbled, still burning in embarrassment as he nudged Tom with his elbow.

“Well, whoever it was,” Dumbledore said, looking positively delighted, “I was happy to see them having fun. Now, I am sure you have much to discuss with your upcoming writing, so I will leave you be. I will see you all again next Monday morning.”

They all got up from their seats, everyone very obviously making fun of Harry and Tom.

“Laugh it up,” Tom said, twisting Theo’s ear between his fingers.

“Ow, ow, okay!” Theo exclaimed, giggling.

Tom let him go as they exited the classroom, everyone calling out goodbyes to Professor Dumbledore. “I need to go and do something, I’ll meet you back at the chapel.”

“Oh, where are you going?” Harry asked, frowning to himself.

Tom smiled. “I just need to do something, I’ll meet you in about an hour.” He looked over Harry’s shoulder at the others. “Catch Harry up on our ideas for the play.”

And then he was walking down the hallway without them, Harry watching him go a bit pathetically.

“Right…” Theo said, frowning. “Well, come on then, we have lots to catch you up on, Harry. We’ve been writing this play for years.”

— Scene nine —

When they got back to the chapel they all sat around the table, Alphard trotting off to make a pot of coffee while Gaspar helped him bring all the mugs through to the library.

Harry was a bit miffed about Tom disappearing to do God knows what. But he tried to see the bright side of things, and thought that it might do him a bit of good to be away from Tom for a while; his crush was getting wildly out of hand.

“You said you’ve been writing the play for years?” Harry asked curiously as he tapped a cigarette out of his pack.

“Yep,” Rick replied. “It started after fourth year when we watched the seventh years’ end of year play. We went to opening night and Tom was so pissed off about them ruining the opportunity they had by writing such a mediocre play, that he roped us all into brainstorming for *our* play.”

“But weren’t there a lot more people in fourth year?” Harry asked with a frown.

“Yeah, but it’s as if Tom’s always had a weird ability to know exactly who would be progressing and who would be kicked out,” Abraxas said with a frown and Harry busied himself with lighting his cigarette to not react. “So, he gave the other people really insignificant hypothetical roles, and then when they got kicked out he’d just write them out of the play.”

“I see,” Harry said, trying for his best concerned frown while biting back a laugh. “So what did you come up with?”

“We decided we wanted to do a tragedy,” Theo stated, looking excited, “we all agreed that it was the richest genre in terms of potential storytelling.”

“Agreed,” Harry said, motioning for Theo to go on.

“Well, we came up with this storyline that follows a Royal Court, fictitious of course, and the leader of this Court alienating himself more and more as he grows paranoid of his surroundings. We have this whole thing planned, so it’s a bit annoying that Tom’s not here because he has the first draft, but basically it would end with this King, completely alone, having killed everyone in his circle. He’d have all this power, but he’d be completely alone, and there would be a minute of lucidity at the last second where he wonders what the fuck he’s done,” Theo explained in a rush.

“Okay,” Harry said pensively, “so like, a tragedy about power and how it alienates, basically?”

“Something like that,” Alphard said as he came back with Gaspar. “We had this whole thing about quid pro quos too, where the King would overhear us, his counsellors, talking about him. In reality we were just worried and planning on ways to help him, but he’d only hear incriminating parts.”

“It was kind of like a study on the paranoia that comes with power,” Rick said, accepting the cup of coffee Gaspar handed to him with a smile.

“How did it end?” Harry asked curiously. “Once he’d killed everyone that was it?”

“Yeah, there was like a minute of silence at the end where he just looked around at all his friends he’d killed,” Theo said.

“Wouldn’t it be cool—” Harry said, taking a drag of his cigarette— “by the way, I’m assuming the King is Tom, right?”

“Yes,” Theo said with a laugh.

“Wouldn’t it be cool if at the end when he’s killed everyone, and is just looking around, kind of horrified,” Harry went on, “he catches his own eye in a mirror, or something, just his reflection; and that breaks the lucidity he was feeling, and his paranoia comes back but on *himself*? Or is that too weird?”

“Oh, no, that’s a good idea,” Alphard said, leaning back on his chair’s hind legs. “It would leave a kind of open ending, even if it was subtle.”

“I agree,” Theo said eagerly, “and we know Tom could do a brilliant job of it.”

“Right,” Harry said happily. “Tell me the rest then, and we’ll try and see if we can fit a small character in for me somewhere.”

The boys walked Harry through the play, through five Acts with a few scenes each. He listened attentively, asking questions and proposing ideas, trying to contribute to this huge amount of work they’d all already done. Another stab of guilt prodded at him at having barged in on them during their last year at the school.

His friends seemed all too keen to include him though, and so they took his ideas and discussed them, Alphard even grabbed a piece of paper at some point and started jotting down spark notes. Harry really liked their ideas, and was excited for when Tom got back so he could read the manuscript.

It wasn’t likely that Harry would get a really important role, as, aside from the King, there were no major roles. But, he would be happy to be one of the counsellors along with the others. He was sure they could do something really good with the initial idea.

They were all chatting animatedly, cutting each other off, laughing, and raising their voices, when Tom got back. Harry didn’t hear him at first as he was in a heated debate with Theo that had them biting laughs back.

“Oh, Tom,” Gaspar said as he looked past Harry’s shoulder.

“Oh, Harry’s got some brilliant ideas for the play!” Alphard exclaimed excitedly.

Harry spun around, his face breaking out into a grin at the sight of Tom’s flushed cheeks from the cold. He watched him take off his coat, looking sheepish. “Hi,” Harry said, somewhat

breathlessly, his eyes trailing down to where Tom was holding what looked like seven small books.

“I’m sure he has,” Tom said kindly, flashing Harry a small smile. “But, I actually, er—”

“Oh no,” Theo said, sporting a frown when Harry turned to look at him, “what have you done?”

Tom cleared his throat as he walked over to his seat at the table, and the others grew silent at his shifty demeanour. Harry watched, somewhat nervous, as he set the books down in front of himself and poured some coffee into a cup. The book covers were blank and the books themselves were thin, the pages held together by plastic loose leaf binding.

“I have actually been working on the play for some time now,” he said levelly, not quite meeting anyone’s eye, “and I have the first draft for you here.” He slid the pile of books into the centre of the table, and everyone’s eyes followed the motion. “There are bits and pieces missing, most notably the very last scene as I can’t decide what to do. I thought it might be a starting point.”

“But—we already had the draft we made last year?” Theo said, looking puzzled. “Only Harry needs to read it and we’ll all be caught up.”

Tom shifted in his seat and tapped out a cigarette, lighting it. “I rewrote the play. To include Harry,” he said, voice not as assured as it had been. Harry had never seen him quite so shifty.

Harry’s heart was hammering though, at the fact that Tom had rewritten the whole play to include *him*, and he worried everyone could hear it thudding against his ribcage in the absolute silence that followed Tom’s statement.

“Oh,” Theo said eventually, sitting back in his seat. “Well, that’s good, because we were talking about that and we were just trying to figure his character out. I’m assuming you made him a counsellor like the rest of us?”

Tom exhaled some smoke. “Not exactly,” he said, clearing his throat. “And I changed Rick’s character a bit, you speak Italian, don’t you?”

“Er—yeah?” Rick said in the stunned silence that followed Tom’s question.

“Oh, what the fuck have you done?” Theo asked, snatching up a copy of the play and opening it. They all watched him read and turn the first few pages furiously for a couple minutes, except for Tom who was pointedly ignoring the situation. Theo looked up, looking somewhere between furious and disbelieving. “Read this, all of you, read it,” he said, gesturing to the pile of books.

Everyone lunged for the books, except Harry who ended up taking the last one, feeling apprehensive. The title page was blank, and he assumed Tom hadn’t come up with one yet.

The first page with writing was the character presentation page, and it read:

CHARACTERS

ALARIK, King of England
ELIO, Prince of Italy
FIDEL, Alarik's closest counsellor
LAMONT, one of Alarik's counsellors
ALESSANDRO, Elio's friend
LENNON, one of Alarik's counsellors
DELANCEY, poet, part of Alarik's Royal Court
A servant
Various members of the English Royal Court

Harry hadn't thought to ask what the others' character names were, but he was quite sure there had never been a mention of the Prince of Italy. He swallowed, seeing the unknown character's name right below Tom's, but he tried to ignore the slight shake in his fingers as he turned to the first page.

It was silent as they read. The only sounds breaking through that of the pages turning, Tom tapping his fingers on the table from time to time, someone taking a sip of coffee and setting their mug back on the table, and the occasional flick of a lighter.

Harry was completely engrossed in the story, a perpetual blush plastered to his cheeks. The writing was good, and he delighted in seeing Tom's clean handwriting so elegantly sprawled on the pages. The plot of the story was also very good, and he could clearly see the plotline the others had been explaining to him.

But this was no longer just a tragedy. It was no longer about power. This was, at its core, a *romance*. Between the King of England and the Prince of Italy.

Theo was the first to finish reading and Harry saw him quietly shut the book, setting it down with the utmost care, before sitting back in his seat and crossing his legs. He looked the picture of someone who was holding everything back as he lit a cigarette and stewed in his thoughts for a while.

Harry couldn't even look at Tom.

One by one they finished reading and everyone seemed to mimic Theo, setting the book down slowly and remaining silent. There was a certain tension in the air and it was making Harry nervous for some reason. He was the last to set his book down, though he kept his thumb in it, marking the last page. Like Tom had said, the last scene was missing.

"Well?" Theo said, sounding inexplicably angry, when the silence stretched on for another minute.

"What are you looking at me for?" Tom replied, frowning at him. "*I'm* waiting for your feedback."

Theo scoffed, looking around at the rest of them. "Okay, I have a few things to say."

"Then please, share with the room," Tom said, a muscle in his jaw ticking.

Harry felt utterly speechless, unsure of how to tread. Tom and Theo were clearly annoyed at one another though he couldn't quite decipher *why*.

Theo crossed his arms across his chest. "Obviously, the writing and the story are terrific," he stated, surprising Harry with the difference between his words and his demeanour. "Am I pissed you did all this without telling us *anything*? Yeah. But it's still good, and I'd be happy to feature in this play."

"Well what are you so pissed off about then?" Tom said with a huff.

Theo levelled him with such a look, Harry almost shrank back. "Are we just supposed to ignore that this is just the diary of a sexually frustrated and repressed Tom Riddle?" he asked, and Harry had to bite down on his cheek to keep his face blank.

Colour instantly rose to Tom's cheeks, his stance going from on edge to defensive. He glared at Theo. "Don't be stupid—"

"Oh please," Theo said dramatically, and Harry still felt like he was *missing* something, as if this argument had been long standing between them.

"Theo—" Gaspar tried to interject, looking slightly puzzled.

But Theo ignored him, looking straight at Tom. "The *dance* sequence? If that isn't an excuse to get your hands on—"

"Theo," Tom said, and his voice was so cold and hard Harry sucked in a breath. Even Theo's jaw snapped shut, a hint of uncertainty passing over his features. "Shut up," Tom said quietly, tone lethal, "and come outside."

Theo swallowed. "I'm not coming outside—"

"Come the fuck outside or I'm dragging you out there myself," Tom snapped, his hand hitting the table rather forcefully as he pushed himself up. He didn't spare any of them a glance, least of all Harry, as he made his way to the door.

"Fuck," Theo mumbled before following reluctantly. He slammed the door shut behind them, and not a second later Harry could hear shouting, though it was muted and he couldn't make out any actual words.

"Should we— they're not—" Harry said nonsensically, twisting in his seat to watch the door nervously. The voices were fading, as if moving further away.

"No, they'll be fine. They'll just argue," Rick said, though he was frowning. "It happens," he added when Harry didn't look convinced, "at some point Tom always gets genuinely annoyed at how cheeky Theo is, and then they have a big argument."

"Yeah, it happens about once a year," Abraxas said with a strained smile.

They were silent for a while, a tense atmosphere looming over the table. They listened until the voices could no longer be heard, and Harry assumed Theo and Tom had retreated near the

lake to have their argument.

Rick was thumbing at the pages of his booklet. Abraxas was looking up at the ceiling, his long hair falling along his back. Gaspar was biting at his thumb nervously. Alphard had colour high on his sharp cheekbones. Harry, for his part, was fidgeting.

“This is stupid,” he said with a huff after a couple minutes. Everyone’s attention turned to him and he shook his head in disbelief. “They’re ridiculous. What on earth made them so angry? Even Theo admitted the play’s *good*. What did you all think?”

Rick let out a long breath, looking around at the others.

“It’s good, brilliant even,” Abraxas said, tucking a strand of hair behind his pointy ear. “But I understand where Theo’s coming from. He does this everytime—Tom, I mean. He does all the work, and it’s *good*, but we feel like we profit off of that.”

“Yeah, it’s as if he *has* to do everything by himself,” Alphard said faintly.

“I get that,” Harry said, nodding, “but he hasn’t done *everything*. There are scenes missing, and some stuff is written like a summary of what’s supposed to go on. There’s still a lot of work to be done, this is only the first rough draft.”

“I suppose,” Abraxas said, shrugging.

“Also,” Rick said, looking unsure as he glanced around at the others, “the er—the new characters are a bit of a surprise.”

“They’re not,” Gaspar said with an incredulous laugh, and everyone turned to him. “What? You can’t tell me you’re actually surprised. And I think it’s good, having Harry as just another counsellor would have been no good, it wouldn’t have added anything to the play except cutting everyone’s lines down some more. I think the addition of Harry—or Elio, I suppose—makes the play that much more interesting.”

Harry felt his cheeks flush with colour. “We don’t know who I’m supposed to play yet,” he said faintly. “Maybe Tom intended for the characters to be redistributed.”

Amongst the amused and unconvinced looks he got, Alphard laughed lightly. “Elio’s the only character who was given a physical description in one of Tom’s summaries. He has green eyes,” he stated matter-of-factly, as if Harry was being obtuse, “you’re the only one of us with green eyes.”

Harry shrank back in his seat, face flaming. “That can be changed,” he mumbled.

“Tom said he rewrote the play to include you. He wrote Elio for you, I think,” Rick said with a small smile, as if he was trying to deliver difficult news in a gentle manner.

Harry cleared his throat, fidgeting in his seat. “Who are you all then?” he asked in an attempt to divert the attention from him. He didn’t particularly want to consider what Rick’s statement implied.

“Well,” Abraxas started, leaning against the table on his elbows, “if Tom hasn’t changed anything, he’s Alarik, Theo is Fidel, I’m Lamont, Alphard is Lennon, Gaspar is Delancey, and I’m assuming Rick is Alessandro.”

“I used to just be Alexander,” Rick said, “but I suppose Tom changed it to the Italian equivalent if I’m supposed to be Italian.”

“Can you actually speak Italian?” Harry asked curiously.

“I can, my mother’s father is Italian, so I grew up bilingual,” he explained.

“Well, I can’t. At all,” Harry said with a small laugh, “so I’m not sure why Tom would’ve made my character Italian.”

Rick smiled at him, looking amused. “I’ll teach you anything you need, but there won’t be many lines in Italian. Only a few between our characters.”

The door behind Harry opened forcefully, startling him with the gust of cold air that was let in, making him shiver.

A tense silence settled over the table as Tom and Theo sat back at the table, both of them silent. Tom looked *freezing*, the end of his nose was red, his cheeks rosy from the cold, the rest of him bone white. The tips of his fingers were a bit red, and Harry could just tell that they would be icy cold to the touch. He looked a bit like he had on New Year’s Eve. Gorgeous.

Rick cleared his throat, looking between them. “Everything okay?”

Theo’s smile was tight but he nodded. “Fine, sorted.”

“Indeed,” Tom said, his jaw clenched in something that looked like annoyance. “I think we all need to sit on this for a while. I propose we keep this first draft as a basis. We don’t have much to do this week, so everyone should think about it, the writing of the play, the set design, the character appointment—anything to do with the play. We should regroup Friday and sort all the detailing out at that point. Take notes, feel free to write out missing dialogue, or add scenes, or anything you want.”

“Okay,” Theo said stiffly, not looking Tom’s way, “good idea.”

“*And*,” Tom said, ignoring him, “I apologise for not including any of you in this process.” Harry looked over at him sharply, surprised. He didn’t really feel like Tom *needed* to apologise. “I know you’ve all worked hard over the years to get here, and I realise I may have overstepped and taken away a big part of the reward that is writing our own play from you. I only changed the play so much from what we had initially imagined because of Harry’s arrival, and I never intended to write the whole play myself. It was an idea that devolved into a whole production as I kept working on it over the last few months. So, while I do apologise for that, I do also believe the play is *good*, and I’m sure you do too. Like I said, feel free to add, or change, anything you want, you each have your own copies. We’ll come to a consensus on Friday.”

“That’s fine,” Abraxas said kindly. “There’s still everything we worked on together over the years, I’d say so far only Harry hasn’t had the chance to write anything for this play.” Harry smiled over at him.

“Yeah, and I think it’s a good idea to give ourselves the week to think about all this,” Alphard said. “I think we should all bring ideas forward on Friday, whether it be corrections to the text, add-ons, costume designs, set designs, whatever. We’ll work everything out together then.”

“Sounds good,” Gaspar said, pouring himself some more coffee. “Personally I found the play really good, Tom. I think it’s much better, and much more interesting with the addition of Harry’s character and the different direction of the plot.”

Harry cherished the sight of Tom’s small smile, and the way he nodded minutely in Gaspar’s direction.

“I’m glad you think so,” he said, voice less diplomatic than it had been during his apology, more like himself.

“I think we all do,” Rick said, looking around at them all, “s’brilliant.”

“Good, well, we’ll sort out the details on Friday then,” Tom said as he stood up. Harry frowned to himself as he watched him leave the library, traipsing up to their room.

When Harry turned back to the table, Theo looked troubled. His brows were pinched in annoyance as he fiddled with the paper on his pack of cigarettes, but he was nibbling on his lower lip, looking a bit guilty.

Call Harry nosy, but he wished he knew what they’d spoken about outside.

“Anyone fancy a game of bridge?” Abraxas asked, a pack of cards having materialised in his hands at some point, already shuffling them.

“Absolutely not,” Harry said with a grin that was only a bit of an act. He was itching to go up and see Tom, and this was the best opportunity he was going to get.

“Fair enough,” Abraxas said with a laugh. “Still not over the game of poker?”

“Exactly,” Harry said as he picked his things up; his copy of their play, his bag from the morning’s lessons, and his pack of cigarettes. “I’ll leave you to it.”

“See you later,” Alphard said happily.

Harry left with a quick grin, only registering Theo’s sad smile as he turned around.

— Scene ten —

Tom had his back to the door when Harry walked into their room, leaning out of the open window as he smoked a cigarette. He'd let all the cold air in, making it freezing in the room.

Harry set his bag down on the floor by his bed, the rest of his stuff on the desk. He wasn't entirely sure if Tom wanted company, but he settled onto his own bed anyway, back pressed to the wall.

"Are you okay?" he asked tentatively, staring at Tom's back.

He saw Tom's shoulders sag a bit, before he angled himself towards Harry, leaning on his side. His nose was red again from the cold. "Yeah," he replied with a small smile, taking a drag of his cigarette.

"You'll be freezing."

"I already am," Tom replied, flicking the cigarette away. He closed the window carefully and turned back towards the room. He seemed to hesitate for a moment, but to Harry's surprise, he sat down next to him, on his bed, and tucked his feet under himself. "Warm me up," he said with a small grin, almost shy.

Harry just stared for a second, mouth hanging open stupidly. He blinked slowly, and swallowed, before nodding, opening his arms in invitation. "Come here then," he prompted, feeling his heart rate kick up.

Tom smiled, shuffling until he could lay against Harry's shoulder, letting himself be encased in his arms. He was freezing, his shirt cold to the touch, and his fingers that had found Harry's waist were cold even through the layers of his jumper.

Harry held onto his back with one hand, letting the other drift up into his hair, combing through the strands. Tom sighed into him, his body relaxing a bit more.

"Friendships are a scam," Tom mumbled after a few minutes in which he managed to warm up a bit.

Harry laughed against him, holding him a bit tighter. "I'm offended."

"Not—*you*," Tom said, voice muffled by Harry's jumper, "you're different."

"You mean Theo then?" Harry asked, trying to ignore how his heart fluttered at his words.

Tom hummed, not sharing his thoughts, though Harry got the distinct impression he wanted to talk about it.

"What happened?" he asked in what he hoped was an encouraging tone.

Tom sighed, shuffling. He seemed frustrated.

“Do you want me to lie down?” Harry proposed. “You’ll be comfier.”

“Yes,” Tom replied, sitting up so that Harry could move up the bed. As soon as he was propped against his pillows, Tom settled against his chest, wrapping an arm around his waist. Harry’s hands went back to his shoulder blades and hair.

“What happened then?” Harry asked again, allowing himself to press his nose into Tom’s hair.

“He doesn’t know when to shut up,” Tom said with a sigh. His eyes were closed, his fingers skimming the hem of Harry’s jumper absentmindedly, and it was so *domestic* that Harry had to actively shut off some thoughts he was having. He was clawing at his denial like his life depended on it.

“He means well,” he whispered, fingers combing through Tom’s curls.

“I don’t like people analysing me—trying to tell me what I feel, and what I should do.” He shifted a bit, inching closer to Harry in his frustration.

“I understand,” Harry said with a small hum, shivering as Tom’s fingers finally slipped under the hem of his jumper and touched the bare skin of his waist. It was a light touch, the tips of his fingers skimming his hip bone. “But you let me do that, sometimes.”

“I told you, you’re different,” Tom sighed. “I just—as much as I do *like* our classmates, they’ve never understood me, I’ve always been different. How could they? They grew up in luxury, with families, with siblings, and I’m an orphan. There’s such a divide between us, and as much as Theo is my friend, he’s never understood me. You do.” His hand settled under Harry’s jumper, fingers and palm pressing flat against his stomach, just shy of his ribs. “You’ve experienced loss, and abuse, and mistreatment, and public schools, and the idiots of the general public. You’ve gotten into fights, and you had to *work* to get into this school, to pursue theatre. You’re just—you’re like me, so as much as I *hate* it when you read me like an open book, I know that you’re just telling on yourself in the process. And that makes it not so bad, it makes the experience less lonely.”

Harry took a steadying breath, pressing his eyes shut against the onslaught of the overwhelming smell of Tom that he’d come to associate with *home* to a certain degree. “I see what you mean,” he managed to say. He turned onto his side, wrapping Tom up in his arms, tucking him under his chin. It felt so nice to hold him close. “And I understand your frustration, but you can’t stay mad at each other. Not over something so silly.”

Tom sighed into his chest, his arm wrapping around Harry’s back and holding tight. “I know.”

They stayed like that for a while, until Tom’s fingers warmed up properly, until his breaths on Harry’s neck started to even out and Harry suspected he was starting to fall asleep.

It made him laugh, the sound jostling Tom back awake. “You can’t possibly be comfy enough to fall asleep in those clothes,” Harry said pointedly. It was impossible to fall asleep in a shirt and slacks, everything was too constraining.

“M’not,” Tom mumbled sleepily. “I’m not falling asleep,” he reiterated, “but I am comfy.”

“You look it,” Harry said, fondness colouring his voice. He did look comfortable, face squashed into his chest, wrapped up in his arms, whole body plastered to him, legs tangled together. Harry was comfy too.

Tom hummed, rubbing his nose against Harry’s jumper. “What did you think of the play?” he asked quietly after a bit. “You didn’t say anything earlier.”

Harry smiled. “I love it.”

“Do you?” Tom said, and Harry could hear the smile in his voice.

“I really do, I think it’s very good. You’re a very good writer.”

“Thank you,” Tom murmured. “Did the others tell you who you would be playing?”

“They thought I’d probably be Elio,” he said after a second’s hesitation, trepidation simmering low in his stomach.

“You are,” Tom confirmed unflinchingly. “Is that okay?” he asked, his voice sounding a tad unsure, as if he was just now realising what he was asking of Harry. As if he hadn’t thought of the implications of them playing lovers on stage.

“Fine,” Harry heard himself say, feeling a bit lightheaded. “I think Elio is a great character, even though I haven’t quite had time to think about him. I’m sure I’ll manage. And I already know we play very well together.”

“We do,” Tom said, sounding a bit smug. “I have some ideas, like for Elio’s costume, things like that. Would you like to see?”

“I’d love to,” Harry replied, once his moment of surprise had passed. He wasn’t entirely sure what to think of the whole situation.

“My notebook’s on my bed,” Tom mumbled. Harry looked over his shoulder and spotted the leatherbound book—the one he’d been dying to have a look at since he’d noticed Tom scribbling away in it.

“You’re going to have to move,” Harry said with a laugh, squeezing him a bit tighter.

Tom groaned, taking a second before he huffed and extricated himself from Harry’s hold. “Sit up,” he said once he was sitting up himself.

Harry did as told, amused as he watched Tom reach over to his own bed to grab the notebook. He made a small sound of surprise as Tom leaned straight back against him, settling himself under Harry’s arm, going as far as looping it around his shoulders and settling Harry’s hand on his chest.

He watched as Tom flicked through the notebook, overcoming his surprise as he caught glimpses of pages upon pages of neat handwriting. Tom stopped on a page full of sketches,

and Harry almost sat up in his surprise, a noise escaping his throat.

“You draw!” he said when Tom looked up at him in question.

He rolled his eyes, a smile pulling at his lips. “Sometimes. I’m not as good as you, they’re just basic sketches to illustrate ideas I have. Anyway, here’s what I had in mind for Elio.” He held the notebook open, and motioned to the main sketch.

It depicted a figure in something like what the Romans used to wear, a sheet folded in intricate ways, ripples cascading down the sides, the waist cinched by another piece of fabric —revealing but also modest. But the figure was also adorned in jewellery; beautiful looking bracelets, dainty rings on each finger, a nondescript necklace, and, the thing that drew the most attention, the ankle bracelets that featured quite a bit in the play. The figure also looked to be wearing quite sharp eyeliner.

It was amazing, and Harry could clearly tell Tom had had a specific vision in mind for this character. The only problem was that he wasn’t sure if *he* could pull this off. The visual, coupled with what he knew of Elio’s character, was a lot—so different from anything he’d ever played before.

“Well?” Tom prompted, looking up at him. “What do you think?”

Harry cleared his throat, and plastered on a smile. “Well, first of all I think you lied about not being very good at drawing.” Tom rolled his eyes. “And I think it’s beautiful, the detail in the jewellery is very well thought out.”

“But…?” Tom said, looking up at him with a frown.

Harry’s smile fell, and he looked away from him, looking instead towards the sketch, somewhat wistfully. “Are you sure I’m the right person for this?” he asked quietly.

He saw Tom’s frown deepen out of the corner of his eye. “Of course you are,” he said, sounding baffled. “Who the fuck else would pull a character like this off?”

“You think I can?” Harry asked, sceptical.

“Harry,” Tom said, inching back a bit to look up at him better, “this role is perfect for you, you’re perfect for the role. You’ll do a terrific job, and you’ll look great doing it if we follow my design.”

Immediately, heat rushed to Harry’s face, leaving him to sputter stupidly. “You think so?”

“I know so,” Tom stated matter-of-factly. “Like all our characters,” he added, no longer looking straight at Harry but having shifted back to his original position, “they’re based on us. Meaning that Elio is based on you.”

Harry didn’t know what to say to that, his heart having lodged itself somewhere in his throat. Never had he thought himself anything like Elio, but it was definitely something if Tom saw him like that.

“Do you have other sketches—for other characters?” Harry asked feebly after he failed to reply to Tom’s statement.

Tom turned to a different page, the sketches there less detailed but just as good. “This is for my character. I’d have a costume change at some point. See here,” he pointed to the first sketch, of a very uptight looking luxurious costume, fit for a king, “this would be my initial outfit. Nothing special, except for how luxurious it looks, maybe. And then here,” he pointed this time to the second page, of what looked like a simple pair of slacks, and a flowy kind of shirt, “this would be after my costume change, after I meet *you*.”

“Oh,” Harry said, reaching out to trace the sketch with his fingertip. “You’ve really thought of everything, that’s some pretty heavy symbolism. Does it mean that Elio strips Alarik of his power?”

“No,” Tom said faintly. He shifted to look up at Harry again, an odd look in his eyes. “It means he reveals the real person underneath the ornate clothes. He brings out the man, when previously there was only a ruler.”

Harry’s mouth opened around words that didn’t come, and he swallowed them back down, eyes flicking between Tom’s. The swirl of his brown irises was enticing, and Harry felt like there was so much to be discovered in them, the flecks of golden only scratching the surface of the treasure that was Tom Riddle.

A knock on the door startled them out of whatever was going on, and they both froze before sitting up abruptly. Harry leant back against the wall while Tom shuffled up towards the headboard. They were still close, their legs pressed together, the notebook sat in Tom’s lap, but at least they weren’t cuddling.

They were both pink in the face when the door opened, revealing a bashful looking Theo.

Tom clicked his tongue in annoyance. “It’s rude to walk into a room without being invited in,” he sniped.

“I knocked,” Theo said, stopping short in the doorway, looking unsure of himself.

“You’re supposed to wait until someone says come in,” Tom replied, his tone of voice edging on mean.

“It’s okay,” Harry said, trying to save the situation despite his embarrassment. “We would’ve said you could come in anyway.” Theo gave him a tentative smile, inching more into the room.

“What do you want then?” Tom asked, arms crossed over his chest.

Theo took that as his cue to walk into the room properly and shut the door behind himself. “I came to say sorry,” he said in a small voice, traipsing over to sit on the edge of Tom’s bed across from them. “I brought a peace offering,” he added, smiling as he held up a joint.

“I think I’d like to hear the apology first,” Tom said, inspecting his nails.

“Er—do you want me to go? Give you some privacy?” Harry asked, feeling like he was intruding.

“No, of course not,” Tom said, looking over at him incredulously. “This is your room too, I’m not going to kick you out.”

“I won’t mind,” Harry said with a small laugh, “if you need to talk some stuff over.”

“No it’s fine, Harry,” Theo said kindly before turning back to Tom. “I just wanted to say sorry for having a go at you. There was some stuff I shouldn’t have said, some things I shouldn’t have *accused* you of. I’m sorry for overstepping.”

“Okay,” Tom replied, looking at the window instead of at Theo.

Harry looked between them, at Theo's sad expression. He cleared his throat lightly, capturing Tom’s attention, and nodded in Theo’s direction. Tom didn’t seem to understand, frowning at him.

“Do you have anything to apologise for?” Harry asked. “Arguments tend to go both ways.”

Tom huffed, rolling his eyes. “I am sorry for saying mean things about you,” he said through gritted teeth, “I shouldn’t have said them, and I don’t believe them to be true.”

“Apology accepted,” Theo said happily. He opened his arms out and said, “Hug?”

Harry laughed at the horrified look on Tom’s face.

“We have never done that, and we never will,” he said, looking thoroughly offended by the proposition.

“Oh come on,” Theo said, getting up and making his way to Harry’s bed with them, “you were cuddling Harry before I came in, surely you can spare one for me?”

Harry felt his face *burn*, and Tom actually *sputtered* around his words as he tried to fight Theo away.

“We were not *cuddling*,” Tom denied.

“Come on, I bet you give great hugs,” Theo pressed, ignoring Tom’s hands that kept slapping his arms away.

“Have you ever heard of consent?”

Theo apparently hadn’t, and Harry laughed as he let himself fall onto Tom, wrapping his arms forcefully around him.

“God, you’re so annoying,” Tom huffed out. “There,” he said as he tapped Theo’s back awkwardly, “get off me now.”

Theo laughed, but obliged, rolling off of Tom and settling in the space between him and Harry, forcing Harry to shuffle back towards the foot of the bed. “What were you doing then? If you weren’t cuddling?” he asked, looking between them.

Harry cleared his throat, his laughter dying out. “Tom was just showing me some ideas he’d had for costumes.”

“Oh, show me,” Theo said curiously. Tom did, opening his notebook again, showing him the pages dedicated to Elio. “Oh! Harry would look absolutely *gorgeous* in this!” he exclaimed, inspecting the sketches.

Harry blushed again, wondering what on earth gave them the impression he’d pull something like that off.

“What were you thinking for the jewellery?” Theo asked. “What metal?”

“Gold, obviously,” Tom replied easily.

“Obviously,” Theo said with a laugh.

Tom closed the notebook, looking at Theo expectantly, and Harry almost thought he was going to tell him to leave. But he didn’t, opting instead for saying, “I thought you’d brought a peace offering?”

Theo laughed, leaning over the space between their beds to grab the joint off of Tom’s. “Ashtray?”

“On the windowsill,” Harry said as Tom looked around. “Leave the window open, will you?”

“Ugh, it’s so cold,” Tom complained.

Harry laughed. “Put a jumper on or something.”

“Mine all need washing.”

“Take my stuff,” Harry proposed, shuffling off the bed to go over to his wardrobe. “Here, you can wear this t-shirt,” he said, pulling out an old t-shirt that used to belong to his dad. None of his own things would be big enough for Tom.

“Dancing Queen?” Tom said as he took it and held it up, cocking an eyebrow in Harry’s direction.

“It was my dad’s,” Harry said by way of explanation, smiling. “He was an ABBA fan.”

“Oh,” Tom said, looking down at the t-shirt. Harry’s heart fluttered at the look in his eyes, as if he was *happy* with Harry entrusting him with his dad’s t-shirt.

“And I think this jumper should be big enough,” Harry said, pulling out a dark blue jumper from a pile. It didn’t have a hood or anything, just a simple oversized jumper he’d found in a thrift shop in London when he’d gone out shopping with Ron and Hermione.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wear this,” Tom said, frowning at it.

“It’s massive on me,” Harry said with a shrug. “I look like a sickly Victorian child in it.”

Tom laughed, shaking his head. “Thanks.”

Harry only watched for a couple seconds as Tom undid his shirt buttons before heading back over to his bed where Theo sat watching them. The look in Theo’s eyes told Harry he saw right through him.

“I’ll sit by the window,” Harry said, taking the place on the bed where Tom had been, “you’ll be a bit less cold like that.”

“Okay,” Tom said, pulling the jumper over his head. He looked excessively *good* in it. “Move, Theo.”

“What? Where to?” Theo asked.

“To the end of the bed, at the nearest. But feel free to leave the room altogether,” Tom sniped, though Harry could tell he was only teasing.

Theo gave him the finger but moved up to the foot of the bed, and Tom sat down next to Harry, tucking his legs under himself.

“I get first light,” Tom said, holding his fingers out for the joint, “if it was intended as an apology to my person.”

“You are such a twat,” Theo said with a raucous laugh. He handed the joint over anyway, along with a lighter.

Harry watched him light it, always enthralled by the sight of the joint between his lips, smoke unfurling in white plumes from his mouth. He looked exceptionally soft, sat there in Harry’s bed, curled up on himself, the jumper swamping even his large build.

“Okay, I’ve been dying to know,” Theo said eagerly, sitting against the end of the bed to face them, his legs crossed beneath him, “what did you do for your birthday?”

Tom groaned, dropping his head back against the wall as he exhaled smoke, exposing the long column of his throat that Harry felt a strong urge to lick. “Why do you want to know?”

“I’m curious,” Theo said with a shrug. “You never let me do anything for your birthday, and this year you had such a lovely night you came back to the chapel *dancing*.”

“What makes you think we weren’t out for the New Year?” Tom said.

Theo levelled him with a look. “I’m not stupid, Tom.”

“Debatable.”

“Come on, tell me,” Theo pressed, ignoring Tom’s jibe.

Tom took another drag of the joint, handing it over to Harry with a small smile before he turned back to Theo. “Harry took me to the Italian place in the village and we went to the pub afterwards.”

Harry felt inexplicably shy, unable to shake the feeling that Theo *knew*, so he stayed quiet, busying himself with smoking.

Theo lit up, looking delighted by the revelation. “Oh, did you have a good time?”

Tom was quite obviously fighting back a smile, and Harry was completely charmed by the sight. “It was lovely,” he said softly.

“How did you convince him to go?” Theo asked, looking over at Harry.

“He didn’t leave me much choice,” Tom said, his smile making his dimples show. He took the joint that Harry was holding out towards Theo, and took a drag before passing it on.

“I told you you’d have a nice time,” Harry teased gently, knocking his foot into Tom’s leg.

“The food was nice,” Tom conceded.

“The company nicer,” Harry said cheekily.

Tom laughed, leaning towards Harry a bit in what looked like an unconscious gesture. “The company was acceptable,” he said, the now familiar dopey grin he wore when he was high bright on his face.

Harry reached over to pinch him gently, grinning like an idiot himself.

“This is good, you were right,” Theo said, capturing their attention again. “It’s that strain I gave you for Christmas,” he clarified, holding up the joint.

Tom turned to look at Harry whose jaw had dropped, and they both burst out laughing, Theo giggling along a second later.

Theo ended up staying with them for a couple of hours, before slinking off to his own room to have a nap. He tried to bargain with Tom to sleep in his bed, but Tom refused on the grounds of wanting a nap himself.

When Theo left though, Tom only curled up on Harry’s bed, drawing him into a cuddle.

Harry wasn’t one to complain about things like that.

— Scene eleven —

“Okay,” Tom said as he sat down at the table Friday morning, a steaming mug of coffee in front of him, “let’s see what everyone’s come up with. What should we do first?”

Harry sat across from him, as usual, and he couldn’t help but admire how much of a natural leader Tom was. He looked incredible, in his crisp white shirt, the topmost button undone.

“I think we should do character appointment first, just to make sure we’re all clear on that front,” Abraxas proposed to a general hum.

They went around the table, everyone agreeing to their characters. Harry was last, and he accepted the role of Elio with a nod of his head and a blush high on his cheeks.

They’d spent a quiet sort of week in each other’s company, only leaving the chapel for some meals and for McGonagall’s class on Wednesday morning—Snape had cancelled his for that week, needing to focus his attention on some of his fifth year students. McGonagall had them do breathing exercises, and some relaxing yoga to ‘*fuel their imagination and creativity*’.

Oftentimes any of the boys could have been found hanging around the chapel, scribbling in a notebook or the booklet of the first draft of the play, focused on their task. Harry, for his part, had done his best to work out bits of dialogue, becoming accustomed to the idea of Elio and how he could best embody him. The only thing he hadn’t touched was the last scene, unsure of what to propose for it.

“That’s good,” Tom said as they finished talking about the character appointment. “I think it’s best if we work on the text right now, get that out of the way. Does anyone have any major changes to bring forth, like a scene addition, for instance?”

“Er—I do,” Alphard said, raising his hand as he flicked through his booklet. “I actually thought adding to the first Act as a whole wouldn’t be a bad idea, leading to Harry’s introduction being pushed back to Act two, what do you think?”

“Okay,” Tom said, drawing the word out as if going over the idea in his mind, “what do you propose?”

“I thought adding a scene when we leave the throne room wouldn’t be bad, a scene between me, Abraxas, and Gaspar.”

“Alright, let me just—” Tom said, writing the idea down on a piece of paper. “We’ll go around for any major changes and see what we can do with them all before committing to any. But I like the idea of only introducing Harry in Act two.”

“I had another big change,” Rick said, “I think we should keep all deaths for the fourth Act.”

“I see, are you proposing we stop Act three after my monologue?” Tom asked, looking pensive.

“Yeah.”

“Good idea,” Tom replied, jotting it down on the piece of paper. “Anyone else?”

Theo and Abraxas proposed some major changes in the text as well, wanting to add scenes here and there, or change the order of some actions.

“Okay,” Tom said, already on his second mug of coffee by that time, a new cigarette dangling between his fingers. “I think all these ideas can coexist in the play. Has no one thought about the very last scene?”

“I think that’s up to you, Tom,” Theo said with a shrug. “There’s a choice to be made, and we can’t really make it. I suppose Harry could, seeing as though it concerns both your characters.”

“What do you think, Harry?” Tom asked.

Harry, who hadn’t spoken much since the beginning of the meeting, sat up straighter. “I’m not sure,” he said honestly, “I tried to think about it, but everything depends on who the main character is.”

“It’s Alarik,” Rick said with a frown.

“No, he’s got a point,” Tom said, taking a drag of his cigarette, “it’s unclear whether Alarik or Elio is the main character.”

“They both are, I think,” Theo said, looking thoughtful. “It depends on whose perspective you follow which is quite funny, because Elio is the main character in Alarik’s story, and vice versa.”

“I agree,” Tom said, “I think we’ll have to leave the last scene for a bit later. We should write it together, Harry.” He caught Harry’s eye, looking almost hopeful.

“Yeah, fine by me,” Harry said with a smile. “If we manage to work out the details of the rest of the play, it should give us more direction for that last scene anyway.”

“Exactly,” Tom said happily. “Now, we need to go into more detail and actually write the rest of the play which is going to take a while. First, does anyone have any modifications to anything *I* wrote in the first draft other than actually writing out the summaries I put?”

“Er—yes, me, in Act one, Scene one,” Gaspar said, raising his hand.

There were a few modifications of what Tom had written, mainly changing wording to fit the characters better. It didn’t take long, and soon they were moving onto writing out Tom’s summaries into actual dialogue.

“I wrote out the dialogue for what is now Act two, Scene two,” Harry proposed, looking for that page in his notebook. “There’s just some stuff you’ll have to fill in, Rick, because I put it in English but added ‘*in Italian*’ in parentheses.”

“Okay,” Rick said with a laugh, “go ahead.”

Harry read out the dialogue, which wasn’t that long. “I also,” he went on, “added that thing I proposed to you the other day, Theo, about the mirror, except I put it here. What do you think?”

“I knew you’d be perfect for this character,” Tom said, an odd sparkle in his eye he only got when he was really excited about something.

Harry felt himself blush, smiling across the table as his foot tapped Tom’s under it.

“For the Italian, Harry, I only say ‘*the assassin*’, which is ‘*l’assassino*’,” Rick said. “And then ‘*l’arma fatale’* e *‘l’arma segreta*’ on my next line.”

“Cheers,” Harry said, writing the words down, hoping he could spell them out from the sound alone. Rick’s Italian sounded nice, and it was endearing how he’d said ‘e’ instead of ‘and’.

“Okay, anything else?” Tom asked.

“I have a couple more,” Harry said. “I focused on my scenes, so I have one for Act four, and a monologue for Act five.”

“Go ahead,” Tom said with a smile.

Harry did, reading out the scenes he’d detailed. Once he’d finished, the others who had written dialogue filled in the blanks. It all came together very well, as Tom’s summaries had already held a lot of detail.

“There’s only the dialogue between me and Harry from Act three, Scene one left, which is fortunate because it’s the only scene I wrote out this week,” Tom said with a smile, before reading out the dialogue he was proposing.

Harry couldn’t help but blush into the roots of his hair as he listened, unsure of how he’d manage to say any of these lines to Tom’s face without stuttering like a fool. They were declarations of love, grandiose promises of devotion. Nevermind his own lines, he had no idea how he was meant to hear Tom’s lines without swooning.

“God, Tom,” Theo said as he finished reading. “Who knew you were such a romantic?”

Tom cleared his throat. Harry didn’t know how he managed to look so stoic, so confident after speaking such words. “There’s nothing wrong with trying new things,” he said lightly, a smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth.

“Is that everything then?” Alphard asked, stretching his shoulders. “For the actual writing of the play, I mean.”

“Er—apart from the very last scene, that’s everything,” Tom said. “Everyone give me your papers where you wrote out any dialogue, any extra scenes and all that. Label them correctly and I’ll work on getting us new booklets for next week. We’ll still be able to do revisions on them, but at least we’ll have more of a final form with the new ones.”

They sorted out all the loose sheets of paper, and Tom attached them together with a paperclip before putting them in a small folder.

“Harry and I will write the last scene this weekend,” he went on, “and I’ll add that to the booklet as well. We’ll do a final revision at the end of next week for any minor changes to the text, and you can tell us what you think of the end of the play.”

“Okay, well I’m starving,” Rick said. “I say we do what’s left this afternoon, after some lunch.”

“Yeah, the cafeteria’s open now,” Theo said, looking over at the clock. “Let’s go.”

They all grabbed their things and pulled their shoes on, Gaspar scrambling upstairs at top speed to actually get dressed properly instead of wearing his pyjamas.

The morning had been extremely productive, and Harry couldn’t believe they’d actually managed to basically finish writing the play. Tom seemed to be in a brilliant mood as they walked up to the school, the sun shining high in the sky but the Scottish air nipping at their exposed skin, turning Tom’s nose red and his cheeks pink.

“Are you pleased with the play then?” Harry asked him as they walked side by side.

“Couldn’t be happier,” Tom said, his smile lighting up his eyes, the golden glints shining in the sunlight. “I think everyone’s additions were relevant and good. The writing everyone brought was up to par with the standard I was hoping to uphold, yours was particularly good,” he shot Harry a grin, their arms bumping. “And I think the play is very good, if I do say so myself.”

“I think so too,” Harry was quick to say, smiling up at him. “And I think you’ll do a terrific job in playing the King.”

“I think we’ll be great together,” Tom said with a charming smile, and Harry couldn’t help but agree, though he didn’t only mean in the play.

The cafeteria was already packed when they got there, and they had to squeeze through groups to get to the main line. Oddly enough, their usual table at the back of the room was vacant, so they sat down, Harry across from Tom in the corner. Alphard sat next to him while Theo sat next to Tom, leaving Abraxas, Gaspar, and Rick in a triangle beside them.

“You know,” Theo said as they were eating, his voice just loud enough to be heard over the chatter of the hall, “the play is risky. Dumbledore’s a bit of a traditionalist, he might not like us not respecting the rule of propriety.”

“Oh come on,” Rick said, rolling his eyes, “onstage death featured in *Hamlet*, he shouldn’t be surprised if we do the same.”

“Yeah but showing death is one thing,” Theo said with an amused smile, “sex is another.”

“What?” Rick said, confused. “There’s no sex in the play, there’s not even a kiss!”

“Rick,” Tom said, baffled, “what do you think the dance scene is in Act three?”

“Oh my god, I hadn’t realised,” Rick said, his eyes wide, looking between Tom and Harry who was simmering in embarrassment. “It’s a *metaphor*.”

“Yes, good job for figuring it out,” Theo said with an eye roll.

“Do you think the teachers will mind?” Harry said, frowning. “As far as implied sex scenes go, I find it quite tasteful.”

“Yeah, but it still goes against the rule of propriety.”

“That applied in the seventeenth century,” Alphard said, gesturing with his fork. “If we follow traditions, we aren’t allowed to show death, eating, sex, critique the King, or speak ill of God.”

“And we have full creative liberty,” Tom said. “I think that goes for risky scenes. They’d tell us if we weren’t allowed to show certain things.”

“I suppose so,” Theo conceded. “I bet there’ll be some right stuck up people in the audience who will be scandalised.”

“They’ll be in uproar well before that scene,” Gaspar said, amused. “From the very beginning there’s no doubt that the relationship between Alarik and Elio is romantic, and *intense* as fuck at that.”

“We’ll definitely be making a statement,” Abraxas said, his lips quirking up in a smile.

“God, it’s theatre, what do they expect?” Tom said, rolling his eyes. “Even Shakespeare was gay.”

Harry laughed in surprise.

“We’re not all gay,” Rick said, laughing as well, “you’re perpetuating a stereotype.”

Tom levelled him with a look. “Two out of seven aren’t odds in your favour, Richard.”

“Wait—” Alphard said with a frown. “Two out of seven? Who are the two straight ones?”

“Abraxas and Rick, though Rick’s straight status is frankly debatable at best,” Tom said casually, going back to take a bite of his food as everyone but Harry froze in surprise, turning to look at him with wide eyes. “What?” he said when he noticed.

“I don’t think they knew,” Harry said, amused. “About you, I mean.”

“Oh,” Tom said, nonplussed, “it wasn’t hard to figure out.”

“Wait, how did *you* know?” Theo asked, baffled.

Harry shrugged. “I asked.”

Theo stared at him. “You are a braver soul than I, Harry Potter.”

“You’re such a drama queen,” Tom said to him, rolling his eyes again. He sent Harry an amused sort of look, his lips quirking up in a mischievous grin.

Harry could see that the others were about to try and ask a few questions, but he decided he’d save everyone at that table, including Tom’s good mood, so he said, “So do we only need seven extra people for the play? The four people in the very first scene, the two guards, and a girl to play the servant in Act two, right?”

“Those are the only active roles with lines, yes,” Tom replied. “But we’ll need more people for the ball scene in Act two, a few extras to dance in the background or something.”

Gaspar was the one who seemed to take the hint in the change of subject, adding onto their conversation. “We’ll be asking the sixth years to do the stage direction, won’t we?”

“Yes, I think so,” Tom said, nodding. “Maybe the fifth years as well, depending on how much there is to do.”

“I was thinking we could add to the play by adding music, live music,” Gaspar said. “The ball scene, for a start, will need music. I could compose something on the piano, or Tom, you could if you felt like it.”

“Good idea,” Tom said, looking thoughtful. “Piano and violin would compliment some scenes quite well. It would depend how much we’re thinking of including, but we might need to ask some music students to lend a hand in that regard, if you, Alphard, or myself aren’t available to play.”

They discussed the option of live music throughout the rest of their lunch, and stayed long enough for the Hall to slowly empty out to a point where they could comfortably hear each other while speaking in a normal tone of voice.

They returned to the chapel not long after one o’clock, when they’d started to discuss costumes and found that they needed their notes to show visuals.

“Harry, could you draw the ideas we have? Especially for the stage and set,” Tom asked as they settled back around the table in the library, a fresh pot of coffee in front of them.

“I’ll go get my sketchbook,” Harry said, happy to be of help. When he got back downstairs, Tom greeted him with a grin.

“I was telling them about the portrait you did of me, it’s brilliant,” he said happily, tapping the ash of his cigarette into the ashtray.

“Can I see?” Theo asked eagerly.

“Er—yeah,” Harry said, feeling a bit embarrassed to show that particular drawing. It was easy to see how much he’d put into it, and it made his love all the more transparent. He flicked to the right page anyway, and dropped the book onto the table so they could all get a look.

“Oh wow,” Alphard said, eyes widening.

“That’s *incredible*,” Gaspar said.

“Gosh, the lighting, the *colours*,” Abraxas said, looking well impressed.

“Thanks,” Harry said, laughing a bit self-consciously.

“It’s beautiful, do you have any more?” Theo asked, wide eyed and hopeful. He went to turn the page but Harry was quick to snap the notebook up, not wanting any of them to see the one he did of Tom when he was sleeping. That one was personal, secret.

“Oh is there a nude drawing of Tom in there or something?” Alphard teased.

Harry laughed, smacking him over the head with the sketchbook. “No, you idiot,” he said, though he thought, *there might as well be*.

When he looked up, Tom was looking at him with mischief in his eyes, the shared secret of the secret drawing between them. Harry smiled over at him.

“What are we thinking for the set then?” Harry asked, opening the notebook up to a new page, so as to change the topic of discussion.

“The whole play is happening in the castle, so we’ll need a base to reflect that,” Tom said, thinking. “Then we’ll need three different minimal set changes; the throne room, bedrooms, and the ballroom. Then there’s also the courtyard which could be trickier.”

“Let’s figure out the base first then,” Harry said, “then we can work from that.”

They all threw ideas around, it being a point of the play no one had thought much about until then. They settled on a lighter stone-like base, instead of the dark scene they’d originally thought of going with. They’d have the art students fashion columns in the backdrop, a mimic of a window, and tapestries and candles along the walls. It was simple, but it was enough.

They figured out what kind of props they would need for the more detailed settings, like the ballroom and bedrooms. The throne room, where a lot of the play would take place, didn’t deviate much from the base set.

Thankfully, when they moved onto costumes, everyone had an idea for what they wanted for their own characters. Tom, of course, had his costumes in mind. The others had thought along similar lines for theirs, traditional looking luxurious items, though each piece remained unique to the characters.

Only Rick had fashioned his idea more along the lines of what his character would wear; luxurious dressing, yes, but more quaint, more adequate for someone who had travelled a long way. He classified what he wanted as ‘distinctly Italian’ which made them all laugh.

Tom was the only one who had prepared a costume change, and everyone thought it a brilliant idea for the symbolism.

It was Harry, though, who would really stand out from the rest; his simple dress clashing with the ornate jewellery he was meant to wear, but complimenting each other in a distinct way. The other boys were floored by the costume design, and thought it absolutely brilliant.

“I think it was a great idea to put Harry in Act two and not before, because his entrance will be spectacular,” Tom said, looking smug.

“I agree,” Alphard said. “He’ll stand out completely from the rest of us, and it’ll show that he’s a pivotal character in the play.”

Harry finished up all the sketches while the others chatted about various logistics of the play.

“Right, well,” Tom said once they’d finished everything up, “I’ll get us the new copies of the play next week, and I’ll schedule a meeting with the art students working on the project in two weeks, okay? I’m gonna need someone to schedule auditions for the extra roles, as well as find the people who will be working on stage direction.”

“I can figure out the auditions,” Theo said, yawning.

“I can work on the stage directions,” Abraxas said. “I’ll get the fifth and sixth years in on it.”

“Good,” Tom said, tapping out a cigarette. “Well, we’ve certainly done good work today.”

“Pizza and whiskey?” Rick proposed with a bright grin. He was met with enthusiastic agreements.

“I’ll ring, what does everyone want?” Harry said, getting up. He took everyone’s orders, agreeing to do half and half with Tom who couldn’t decide what he wanted. It reminded him of the restaurant on his birthday, and if the glint of amusement reflected in Tom’s eyes was anything to go by, it reminded him of the same thing.

Rick served them all a glass of whiskey, and they toasted to the future success of their play.

— Scene twelve —

They ended up having a wonderful evening, even if they overindulged as they had a bit of a tendency of doing. It was nice to have a reason to have fun. It was a celebration of what they'd managed to do that day, a celebration of how well they worked together.

With such a busy day, the celebrations didn't last long. By eleven o'clock Theo's eyes were drooping, and Gaspar was humming with his eyes closed. They called it a night by that point, everyone traipsing off to their rooms.

But Tom didn't seem tired, in fact, he was just drunk. Harry had learnt to recognise the signs in him, and overly talkative and giggly were generally the most telling signs.

"I think we should start now!" Tom said as they got to their room, after brushing their teeth together over the sink, pushing and shoving at each other.

"Start what?" Harry asked, his whisper slurred for how drunk he was as well.

"The last scene," Tom said, eyes bright, "we should write the last scene."

"Yeah, okay, good idea," Harry said, jumping onto Tom's bed and settling in.

Tom followed, a pen and his notebook in hand. "Right," he said, crossing his legs under himself, "this is the end of the play, it concludes the story, concludes the tragedy. What do we want out of it?"

Harry took a breath, trying to think. "It's a confrontation, between you and me," he said, recontextualising them. "The question is, after what you did, how is that confrontation going to end?"

"Badly," Tom said gravely, making them both laugh louder than they should have. They shushed each other, only worsening their giggles in the process. "Tragically, I mean. It has to be as tragic as possible."

"Betrayal, then," Harry said. "I have to betray you."

"But you couldn't, I know that you love me—" Tom stopped short, blinking, while Harry's heart stopped, his head spinning for a sickening second. "I mean," Tom said quickly, "I mean Alarik knows Elio loves him, even if he betrayed him, it wouldn't matter. How could he even betray him?"

"By fulfilling what he came to England to do," Harry said, as if he'd just had an epiphany.

"Of course," Tom said slowly, eyes bright and excited. "Of course! But then what of you—what of Elio? How would his story end?"

Harry hummed in thought, mulling it over. Elio was an odd character—mysterious, elusive. He was the kind of character who went wherever the wind took him, who succumbed to the

desires that overcame him, his whims. He fell in love in an instant, kept his duty in mind but wasn't intent on fulfilling it. He was a romantic.

"The same way," Harry whispered. "He'd meet the same end—with Alarik."

"He would?" Tom asked, a wondrous quality to his voice that almost convinced Harry to lean forward.

"He would," Harry confirmed with a decisive nod.

"Incredible," Tom mumbled, looking at him with that same wonder in his eyes. "Let's write it then."

Harry felt breathless but he managed a smile—he was used to Tom Riddle taking his breath away. "You're going to need to channel that romanticism from earlier," he said, his voice teasing.

"Oh, don't worry," Tom said with a grin, "I don't need to channel what's always been there."

Harry barked out a laugh, adoring how witty and honest Tom was being.

They got to writing the scene, setting the mood for it by recalling the previous one and describing the characters' states. There was a lot of laughing as they got into it, a lot of clumsy wording proposed.

Someone knocked on the door at some point, when they already had a couple pages written.

"Yeah?" Harry asked in a whisper, contrasting with the loud talking he'd been doing moments ago.

Alphard peaked through the door he cracked open, smiling tiredly at them. "Sorry to bother, but you're being a bit loud."

"Oh, *oh*, sorry Alphie!" Harry whispered apologetically.

"Our apologies, Alphard, we'll be more quiet," Tom said.

"What are you even doing?" he asked, squinting in their direction.

"We're writing the last scene," Harry said excitedly, holding the notebook up.

Alphard laughed lightly, an odd look in his eyes. "Okay, good luck with that. Night!"

"Night! And sorry again," Harry said quickly.

Tom started laughing as soon as the door was closed, and Harry had to clap a hand over his own mouth to keep quiet.

"Okay," he whispered once they'd calmed down, "where were we?"

They jumped back into the writing, and Harry honestly wasn't sure how he survived it—how he survived Tom saying the most heart-wrenching declarations of undying love to him. His words came so easily, as if he meant them, as if he *felt* them. He was so excited about it all, so happy, Harry couldn't take his eyes off him.

"It's hot in here," Harry said at one point, when he felt the alcohol start to wear off, leaving place to a kind of bone deep tiredness. He tugged his jumper off—which was the one Tom had gifted to him—and set in on the bed beside him.

Immediately, Tom snatched it up. "I'm freezing," he complained, the residual ghost of his grin imprinted into his cheeks in the way his dimples were still showing.

He pulled the jumper on, probably still warm from Harry's body heat. The hood mussed up his hair, leaving him beautifully dishevelled in the warm lamplight.

He shot Harry a winning grin and said, "Let's finish this then," in that excited tone of voice he'd been sporting all evening.

And Harry—tired, breathless, enamoured Harry—lost his grip on his denial, and a single thought rang loud and clear in his mind. It was a simple fact, one that branded him like a curse.

I'm in love with you.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaah tell me what you thought in the comments! Just wanted to take a second to thank everyone who has been reading and commenting thus far, I really appreciate people taking not only the time to read, but also to share their thoughts with me <3

- In scene 1, the quote *"everything I've ever let go of has claw marks on it"* is by David Foster Wallace.

I'd love to know what your theories/thoughts on the play are...

Thank you so much for reading!! Act IV will hopefully be out Friday (if I edit it in time) and it's a little shorter with 40k words! See you then xx

Chapter 4: Act IV

Chapter Notes

Hello! Act IV is here :D

Important info:
- In **Scene 4** the song being played is *Paris, Texas* by Lana Del Rey (the instrumental version, which features in the playlist for the fic linked in the og AN)
- For **Scene 7**, first of sorry it's a little cringe, it almost got cut but I decided against it because I didn't know what it could be replaced with. Second, there's a playlist specifically for this scene (spotify link) -- it's not necessarily meant to be listened to, it just regroups all the songs mentioned, give them a listen if you've never heard some of them!
- You'll want to prepare to read **Scenes 10 and 11** back to back
- For **Scene 12** please listen to *Sun bleached flies* by Ethel Cain. If you're not the type of person to listen to music while reading that's fine, just give it a listen after Scene 11 if you want, but trust me, having this song in mind, better yet, listening to it while the scene plays out, will make it that much better. Without it, it'll seem a little goofy, but with it it will be as special as intended.

Thank you for listening to my annoying instructions lol, have fun reading xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ACT IV

— Scene one —

“You’re kidding?” Rick said, setting his copy of the play on the table as he looked between Harry and Tom in disbelief.

They were in the library, a week after their last meeting regarding the play. Tom had made the final booklets for them during the week, while Theo had scheduled auditions for the next Friday, and Abraxas had set up a meeting with the fifth and sixth year theatre students for the first week of February regarding the technical stage directions. Tom had also set up a meeting with the seventh year art students the following Monday for the set and costume designs.

“What’s the matter?” Tom asked, a frown pinching his brow.

“The last scene’s brilliant!” Rick said brightly, laughing disbelievingly.

“I thought you wrote this when you were drunk? How is it so good?” Alphard asked them.

Tom sent Harry an amused look. “We cleaned it up over the weekend, it wasn’t as good as it is now.”

“Yeah…it was a bit silly at times,” Harry said, a crooked grin flashing in Tom’s direction. He was scratching at his arm a bit self-consciously, his heart feeling like it was in his throat. The realisation that he was in love with Tom weighed over him constantly, worried it was written all over his face for the world to see.

“Well, I think it really ties the play together. We’ve done a great job,” Abraxas said, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear.

“Not that the ending isn’t great,” Theo said, picking at the corner of a page, “but is it not a bit confusing? With you getting up again, Tom?”

Tom shifted in his seat. “Lighting will do wonders for that scene, I think. In text it is a bit confusing, and I think the text on its own isn’t great. *But*, with all the production we’ve got planned it’ll be really good. That’s what I wanted to talk about actually, stage directions, pacing, all that.”

Alphard hummed. “I think the text itself is really good, but you're right. It’s the kind of play that just has to be produced. The actual text is only a part of it.”

“What do we think the run time will be?” Gaspar asked.

“I’d say an hour, an hour and a half? Two hours max.” Tom said, shrugging. “It’s not long, there’s not much text, but some scenes will be dragged out despite there being little dialogue. For instance, at the start of the very last scene, I’m on my own and I only have like four lines.

But, it's a scene that should take up at least a few minutes because there'll be a lot of silence. Same goes for Act five, scene one; it's just Elio, and he doesn't say much, *but*, the pacing between Acts four and five are completely different."

Harry hummed. "The fourth Act is really fast paced, whereas the fifth is really slow."

"Shall we fill in the stage directions then?" Theo said. "The ones we're sure of anyway, I'm sure others will come when we start rehearsals."

"When do we get the theatre anyway?" Harry asked, tucking a leg under himself.

"The sixth years have priority until mid February because they're doing parts of *Romeo and Juliet* for Valentine's day, like they do every year," Tom said.

"Like how we did *Macbeth*?" Harry asked, curious. He hadn't heard much about the other years' plays. He only knew that the sixth and fifth years each had a play at the end of May.

"Exactly, yeah," Tom said.

"Did you do *Romeo and Juliet*?" Harry asked, amused. Tom had never said anything about it.

"Yeah, but I wasn't Romeo, Rick got that role—"

"And I nailed it," Rick said smugly.

"You were just happy to snog Amanda on stage," Gaspar teased.

"Who's Amanda?" Harry asked curiously.

"She was in our year up until this year," Theo explained to him, "she got cut though. There were two other boys too."

"Oh, yeah, I remember you told me about them," Harry said, pulling one of his feet up onto the chair with him.

"I hated the boys," Tom said, rolling his eyes. "They had very little talent, and absolutely none outside of acting. I was surprised Amanda got cut though, I expected her to stay on. She wasn't bad."

"You called her a bitch. To her face," Theo deadpanned.

"I said she was good, I didn't say we got along," Tom replied, eyebrow cocked as if to prove his point. "And I apologised for calling her that, at your insistence."

"You agreed that you were out of line for saying that," Theo said. "Though she was a bit out of line when she called you—what was it? A self-centred narcissistic bastard who couldn't see further than his own nose for how utterly self-absorbed he is. Yeah, safe to say she wasn't wrong."

“Anyway,” Tom said, turning back to Harry who was laughing, “I played Capulet, Juliet’s father. I already had the lead role in our sixth year play, and a big role in the seventh years’. I didn’t want to be Romeo anyway.”

“You still sulked about it though,” Theo teased.

“The stage directions, come on,” Tom urged, ignoring Theo. “We’ll do it from beginning to end, it’ll be easier.”

They did just that, marking down set changes, lighting directions, and other things specific to their characters, such as pauses, pacing, physical contact, and the like.

“Okay, that should do for now,” Tom said an hour later, rubbing at his neck in a way that Harry knew meant he wanted to stretch his shoulders. It was odd, how Tom refused to give in to basic urges when around others. “The rest will come as we go.”

“Should we settle on a title?” Abraxas asked. “While we’re at it, you know.”

“Any ideas?” Tom asked after a noncommittal hum.

“Well, aside from the obvious, not really,” Rick said, crossing his arms across his chest.

“What’s the obvious?” Gaspar asked, tapping the rubber at the end of his pencil against the tabletop rhythmically.

“You know, names,” Rick said. “*Alarik*, for instance.”

“*Alarik of England*?” Alphard proposed.

“I’m not sure,” Tom said, shrugging.

Harry frowned as he squashed his cigarette in the ashtray. Tom was rarely so little forthcoming, especially about the play. He always had an opinion to hand out. “Has the title of the play been bothering you?” he asked, unsure of when he’d decided to speak the words that came out of his mouth.

Tom looked over at him sharply. “As a matter of fact, it has,” he said slowly. “I can’t decide.”

“Between?” Harry prompted.

Tom shrugged again. “It will come to me, don’t worry.”

“Do you want us to think of ideas?” Theo asked, looking a bit confused. “Or would you rather come up with it yourself?”

“Feel free to propose ideas,” Tom said simply.

Harry got the feeling he would reject any ideas any of them proposed, as he already had his own ideas in mind. What he didn’t understand, though, was why Tom was so reluctant to share them.

“Well, Dumbledore’s gonna be well chuffed with what we’ve got,” Alphard said jovially.

“Definitely,” Tom agreed. “So, just so we’re all clear, Monday we have the meeting with the art students, next Friday we’re holding auditions for the secondary roles, and on the 2nd of February we’re meeting with the fifth and sixth years for the stage directions.”

“Yep, sounds good,” Harry said, stretching back in his seat. He’d expected this term to be much more stressful, but with everyone being exceedingly involved and engaged, everything was going smoothly, and they were left with a lot of free time. He knew he was lucky though, the group projects he’d done in school had nowhere near the amount of organisation and cohesion they all portrayed together, and he was very aware that, sadly, being on top of things to such a stress free degree was not the norm.

“Yeah,” Gaspar said, getting up. “Who’s coming to the shops with me? I’m out of tea.”

“I’ll come,” Harry offered. He hadn’t been out in a while and he quite fancied a stroll down to the village.

“Okay, everyone, write down anything you need!” Gaspar said before disappearing upstairs, presumably to get dressed properly.

“Get me some cigarettes, will you, Harry?” Tom asked, looking up at him, his eyes warm and inviting.

“‘Course,” Harry said easily.

“There’s some cash on my desk, you can grab that,” Tom said pointedly.

“Yeah, okay,” Harry said with a smile. He had no intention of taking it, and if Tom's narrow-eyed look was anything to go by, he seemed to know that.

Needless to say, when Harry and Gaspar left, Tom was waiting by the door where he forced the money into Harry’s pocket.

Harry still didn’t use it, merely setting it back on Tom’s desk where it initially was when he got back. There was a small argument that ensued.

— Scene two —

“Good morning,” Snape said as he descended into the classroom like a bat Thursday morning.

“Morning, Professor,” Harry said brightly. He’d gone for a run that morning with Rick, and he was in a very good mood.

On Monday Dumbledore had been baffled by how far they were into their production after only two weeks since getting their assignment. As such, they’d spent the hour of class chatting and drinking tea. That same afternoon the meeting with the art students had gone exceptionally well. Luna, the girl Harry had made friends with and who sold them weed, was in charge of costumes, and she had loved the design Tom showed her for Harry’s.

“My apologies for the last two weeks,” Snape said as he set his things on his desk, “the fifth years are in dire need of help. And, from my understanding, and from what Albus has relayed to me, you do not particularly need my help. Tell me, how far along are you?”

“We have the play written, Professor,” Tom said politely. “We’re in contact with the art department who will start work on our set and costumes as soon as next week, and we’re holding auditions for smaller roles Friday.”

“Impressive,” Snape said, looking genuinely impressed. “Perhaps a record at this school. Usually seventh years leave the writing of the play until as late as the end of March. I am assuming it was already a work in progress.”

“Indeed,” Tom agreed, looking smug.

“Make sure it is as good as you want it to be,” Snape warned. “If you started writing it, perhaps years ago, it could be evident that Harry’s character was a last minute addition.”

“It’s sorted, Professor,” Tom assured. “We reworked the entire thing.”

“That, we did,” Theo said, a teasing lilt to his voice that earned him a glare from Tom.

“Very well then, I look forward to it,” Snape said, looking, against all odds, like he meant it. “I am at your disposal during this time slot for any inquiries you may have concerning any aspect of your acting. I will accommodate your wishes, however, I do have things planned for this term.”

He wrapped his cloak—or shawl, or whatever it was, Harry could never tell—around himself and took a step towards the centre of the room. “Last term we worked on breaking your egos down,” he said, the general memories washing over them like an uncomfortable shiver, “this term, however, I would like to work on building them back up.”

They all glanced at each other, eyes curious. Harry had taken Theo’s seat next to Tom, too caught up in whatever he and Tom were talking about as they entered the classroom that he

ended up sitting there mechanically. When Tom turned to look at him, Harry swallowed, forgetting what Snape had said for a second.

“So, I believe we should start immediately. Harry—”

His snapped his attention back to Snape, eyes wide.

“Come up to the board,” Snape instructed.

“Er—really?” Harry asked weakly. He didn’t want anything like a repeat of what had happened the last time he had gone up to the board.

“Yes, really,” Snape said flatly.

“Er—okay,” Harry said, standing up slowly and making his way to the front of the classroom.

“Good,” Snape said once Harry was standing awkwardly, avoiding Tom’s amused look. “You are somewhat of a company,” he went on, manoeuvring around the classroom, “and it is important that there be cohesion and trust within a company. Last term, I did the talking, for I do not wish to fuel petty feuds, or make the experience more uncomfortable than it need be, *but*, trust was built in your vulnerability to each other in those moments. However, this term you will not be experiencing your peers’ examinations passively. In building each and every one of your egos back up, you will be building upon your own relationships and building further trust.”

He turned and sat on one of the further tables at the edge of the row of seats before he looked towards Harry’s friends. “I want you to tell Harry, here, exactly what you like about him.”

Harry felt his face *flame*, his head rushing with the embarrassment of it all. “No—” he said, the word leaving his mouth before he could think about it. Attention turned back to him and he blushed further, shifting from one foot to the other. “I mean—that’s not really necessary, is it?”

“It is good to be confronted with both the worst and best aspects of people’s perception of you,” Snape said, “for it is rare to recognise them in yourself. You may have unknown strengths only others pick up about you.”

“But—I mean—it’s—” Harry huffed in frustration and embarrassment, cutting his useless stammering off. “Do I *have to*?” he asked, sounding pathetic even to his own ears.

“Yes, it is non negotiable,” Snape stated flatly.

Harry felt almost panicked at the prospect of being put on the spot in such a way. He felt hot all over, his arms having crossed over his chest defensively at some point, his shoulders hunching in on themselves. When he looked away from Snape and caught Tom’s eye, he dropped his gaze down to his shoes almost instinctively.

When no further retaliation came from Harry, Snape turned back towards the others, looking at Gaspar expectantly. “You will take it in turns. Gaspar, you go first, if you don’t mind.”

Harry chanced a look towards Gaspar, appreciating his apologetic look, at least.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Gaspar said, smiling up at him. “But, there are a lot of good things to be said about you, so you might as well hear them. I, for one, think you’re a great friend. You make for brilliant company, and you’re a wonderful listener, always showing interest in our hobbies and such. You’re really interesting, and you’re very funny. When it comes to acting, and all that, you’re really very talented. I was *obsessed* with the audition you did at the beginning of the year, and your rendition of Horatio was brilliant. You’re great to work with, you always have good ideas, and you’re not one to try and impose your way, you take into account what everyone has to say. You’re very good at writing, drawing, obviously, even music! You’re actually probably the most talented of us all,” he laughed lightly, while Harry was doing his best to disassociate from the situation. “I love spending time with you, and I love working with you. You’re a great person, and I hope we’ll stay friends for a long time.”

Gaspar was grinning up at him, his smile so sincere, and Harry didn’t have it in him to not acknowledge all the lovely things he had said. “Cheers,” he said weakly, his voice coming out wonky. His fingers tightened on the jumper he was wearing, he felt tense all over, and his face was *burning*.

“No problem,” Gaspar said kindly, smiling up at him.

“Good,” Snape said. “Richard, you’re next.”

“My pleasure, Professor,” Rick said, and there was definitely a teasing lilt to his voice at Harry’s expense. “I think Harry’s a great bloke. You’re smart, witty, you always make us laugh. Like Gaspar said, you always take interest in our stuff, which I think is one of your great qualities, especially since you can tell the interest is genuine. You’re really kind too, generous. I’d say you’re confident in your own abilities, which I can admire, and you’re always up for a challenge, which always makes stuff fun. Yeah, I’d say you make a lot of things fun, you’re a lot of fun to have around, and you balance us out really well. I like that we have a shared interest in exercise, you’re great company for it, we always have a laugh. And, not to just say what Gaspar said, but when it comes to acting, you’re really talented. I think I’ll always remember that first time we did that rehearsal of the last scene of *Hamlet* and you were crying your eyes out, it was really mind blowing how good you were. And you’re talented at loads of other stuff too, which is always impressive. Yeah, I consider you a really good friend, and I’m happy you joined us this year.”

Harry was choking on his embarrassment, his muscles so tense he worried they’d ache the next day. He’d made himself so small, as if he was trying to fold himself into a corner of his cupboard under the stairs. He desperately wanted to sit down, and leave the room, but he was rooted to the spot, willing the moment to be over. He couldn’t say anything to Rick, so he just nodded in his direction, unable to look him in the eye.

“Thank you, Richard,” Snape said. “Abraxas?”

“I’m worried we’re all going to rehash the same things,” Abraxas said with a kind smile, “so just know that everything the others have said, I think too. So, other than what has already been said, I’d like to point out how good you are at giving advice. Gaspar said you’re a great listener, and that’s true, but you’re also great at giving advice. And you’re honest about it too

—actually, you're honest in everything you do. You're very true to yourself, you've never once pretended to be someone you're not. And I think that's what startled us at first, when we met you, but it's very intimidating being faced with someone who is so unapologetically themself, especially when you're unsure about yourself. You brought an energy to the group that really brought the best out of everyone, and I'm not sure how you did it, I think it might just be natural to you. You're a great friend, and you're a phenomenal addition to our *company*. I think you tie us together, you fill in the gaps between us. I don't think there's a single thing I don't like about you, Harry, really."

Abraxas was smiling at him, his face soft in its sincerity. He always looked a bit demure, and Harry had always thought there was something ethereal to him. He looked particularly otherworldly in that moment, and Harry tried to hide how much he shied away from his words. "Thank you," he said, but it came out as a sort of mute whisper, and he cringed at it. His fingers were moist where they gripped the jumper like a lifeline, and he could feel himself sweating, his back teeth grinding together.

"Good. Alphard?" Snape prompted.

"I consider you a sort of brother, or cousin," Alphard said without preamble, grinning up at Harry brightly. "I think it's because we have Sirius in common, but I really do think that. We get along so well, and, honestly, you're so easy to get on with. You're so fun and easygoing, you're honest, like Abraxas said, and you're entirely true to yourself. And, to be honest, you're entirely right to be, because there's nothing to not love about you. I feel like I've known you forever, you fit in so seamlessly with the rest of us. I admire your talent when it comes to acting, as well as the hard work you put in. You probably rehearsed more than all of us for *Hamlet*, aside from Tom, maybe—" hearing Tom's name in this context was so jarring Harry almost flinched— "and I think that's something really remarkable about you. You really put the work in, and you proved to us all, and yourself, how much you deserve to be here. I, of course, agree with everything Gaspar, Rick, and Abraxas have said, I just thought there was no point going over it again. You're a pleasure to spend time with, and I really wish we could've grown up together, we'd've been the best of friends, I'm sure. I hope we can make up for all the lost time in the future."

Harry's breathing was shallow, and he was starting to feel dizzy—or was that a headache?—from being so tense for so long, the embarrassment gnawing away at him like a vulture picking at a cadaver. "Me too," he said, once again in that awful mute whisper. He looked up at the ceiling for a bit of reprieve, taking in a quick lungful of air, trying to ward off the bubbling heat his body was simmering under.

"How sentimental," Snape commented, his voice devoid of emotion. "Theodore, if you will."

"I would *love* to, Professor Snape," Theo said brightly. Harry didn't look at him—couldn't. He was doing his absolute best to just remove himself from the situation.

"I think I should begin with the obvious," Theo said. "Harry, you're gorgeous, really a pleasure to look at. You honestly brighten up every room by simply being as attractive as you are—" Harry squeezed his eyes shut, his embarrassment worsening tenfold.

“Mr. Nott,” Snape cut in, sounding baffled, “I meant this exercise as more of a character study than an appreciation of physical attributes.”

“You told us to say what we liked about Harry,” Theo said, “I’m telling you. Anyway, there’s that, obviously, but you know that. At least you know that I think that. Aside from how pretty you are, you’re also a great friend. I love having you around, and you’re so interesting. I feel like there’s always more to know about you, so it’s safe to say I love spending time with you. The others have stolen everything I wanted to say, so trust that I think everything they’ve already said. *But*, there is something else. I think the thing that made me like you so much was when, without naming names, you stood up to one of us. You were so confident, your belief in equity and fairness so evident it was shocking. I realised I had someone in front of me who was unshakeable in his morals, so sure of himself, of what was right and wrong, and I admired you so much for it. You really are the puzzle piece we were missing. I could go on about how talented you are, but they’ve said it all, and I’ve already told you how much I admire you for your work. Honestly, Harry, I hope you believe everything we’re saying, because it’s very true, and we all believe it wholeheartedly. Now, I’m not gonna say I want to stay your friend like these losers did, because I *know* that we’ll be friends forever. You don’t have a choice.” He got up suddenly, and Harry could do nothing but watch, eyes wide and pleading, as Theo made a heart with his fingers, and exclaimed, “I love you, Harry!”

Inexplicably, Harry had tears pricking at the corner of his eyes. He was starting to feel like he couldn’t breathe. He tried his best to smile at Theo, his antics pushing the breath out of his lungs in a small laugh, allowing him to get another breath in. “Yeah,” he said stupidly, cringing to himself as his voice came out as a croak on the single syllable. Theo smiled at him anyway, warm and inviting, and Harry wished he could tell him he loved him too, cherished his friendship.

He couldn’t even look at Tom, couldn’t bear the thought of him saying anything.

“Very…exuberant, Mr. Nott,” Snape drawled. “Finally, Tom, the floor is yours.”

Harry knew Tom was trying to catch his eye, but he couldn’t, he just couldn’t bear to look at him in that moment, to bare himself to him.

Tom cleared his throat. “I have a lot of things to say, but I know Harry doesn’t like compliments. I’d like to give him an out, Professor.”

That got Harry’s attention, and his eyes snapped to him, before he looked over at Snape imploringly.

“There is a purpose to this,” Snape said, assessing Tom curiously. “I think Harry needs to hear whatever you have to say, Tom.”

“I won’t if Harry doesn’t want me to,” Tom said, his voice quiet but firm. It allowed Harry a breath, a reprieve.

His eyes caught on Tom’s, and he saw nothing but sincerity there, kindness, and, inexplicably, he nodded minutely. “Go on,” he murmured, “get it over with.” Because there was a part of him that wanted to know, that wanted to hear what Tom had to say.

Tom's smile was beautiful, and he seemed thrilled at the prospect of getting to speak his mind. Harry looked away again.

"In all honesty, there is not a single thing I don't like about you, Harry," he stated, with all the confidence in the world. Harry suppressed a shudder, as if taking some kind of forbidden guilty pleasure in Tom's words. "So the list is long," he went on, "though I'm sure I can pick some of my favourites."

Harry braced himself, as if he were facing a six feet tall muscle machine on the rugby pitch, as if he was expecting Vernon's knuckles, or Dudley's fists.

"Your self-awareness is admirable, for a start," he spoke the words slowly, as if drawing out Harry's suffering in some sort of sick delayed gratification. "Your understanding of others, and your kindness, as well as your excessive generosity, are some things I find particularly charming about your character. Like the others have said, you're a delight to have as company; you know when to let a silence settle, you know when to prod, when to ask questions, when to fill in the blanks, it's a true quality you have that many don't. You're funny, interesting, witty, and smarter than you give yourself credit for. More than that though, you are simply nice, you're a lovely person, and I adore having you around."

"When it comes to talent, I would go as far as to say you're one of the more talented of us all, maybe even the most, but that doesn't negate the hardships you went through and the work you put in to be here today. You're more than worthy of being here and I couldn't be more honoured to play alongside you." He paused, and Harry cracked his eyes open, unsure of when he'd closed them. "And you're exceedingly easy on the eyes, which is a nice bit of reprieve from this ugly bunch," he added as an afterthought, a smug smile on his lips, hiding his shyness, betrayed only by the flush on his cheeks.

Harry blinked, feeling almost nauseous with it all. He swayed on his feet, his back hitting the board a couple of centimetres away from him. Once again, words wouldn't come, so he only nodded in Tom's direction, not meeting his eye. His heart was hammering, Tom's words barely processing in his overwhelmed mind.

"That was not so bad, was it, Potter?" Snape said, getting back to his feet.

Harry took a couple breaths, finally feeling his ribcage loosen its chokehold on his lungs. "It was, actually," he said quietly, feeling a bit dazed, as if he'd held his breath for too long.

"Not worse than last term, surely?" Snape said, sounding amused, as if he thought Harry was just being dramatic.

"It definitely was," Harry said seriously, his voice breathy and rough, sounding odd. "Can I go sit back down?"

"You may," Snape said after a second's hesitation. "Stay back after the lesson, Harry."

Harry stopped in his tracks, his jaw ticking. "Fine," he mumbled, trying to quell the awful feeling of imminent implosion in his chest. He felt exhausted, as if he'd experienced the full range of human emotion in the past ten minutes.

He slumped in his seat, rubbing a hand over his face. He hoped his blush had receded, though he could no longer tell if his face was burning or not, having become numb to the sensation. His limbs felt heavy, awkward. He felt self-conscious in a way he hadn't in a long time.

"Okay?" Tom asked quietly, the tip of his index finger skimming Harry's hand on the table, prodding at him.

He hummed, looking over at Tom and looking away almost immediately. His little finger latched onto him though, needing to feel something familiar to chase away the foreign feeling of profound humiliation that had taken root in his chest.

"Sir?" Abraxas called, drawing attention away from Harry, leaving him to link his little finger with Tom's. "What is the point of these exercises?"

"I'm glad you asked, Abraxas," Snape said, taking his place by his desk. "The point of it is facing shame, unlearning the shame you carry with you, whether that be in how you perceive yourself, or in how others perceive you."

"But why?" Alphard asked.

Snape sighed. "You are on a path that will undoubtedly lead you to—if not fame—public recognition. You will be scrutinised, gossiped about, your personal lives dissected, your boundaries ignored. It is important to learn to face that kind of scrutiny head-on, and not let it affect you. Recognising yourself at your most vulnerable will lessen the shock of seeing it printed on the front page of a magazine. And inane gossip about how awful you are as people will affect you less if you recall what the meaningful people in your life truly think of you."

"Unlearn the shame you have about your weaknesses and strengths, and you will be fit for a life in the spotlight. Fail to do so, and you will crumble under the weighted gaze of the world," Snape said, looking at them all individually.

"That's…actually really smart, and thoughtful," Theo said pensively.

"Yes, I am qualified to teach this position, Mr. Nott," Snape snarked, making some of them laugh. "Go on then, that is enough for today. I will leave you to do whatever it is you do."

Harry didn't get up as the others left. If he had to stay back, he didn't fancy having to do so standing up again. Tom was the last to leave, his hand lingering on Harry's shoulder as he did so.

When the door shut behind him, it was quiet, and Harry didn't know what to expect. He kept his gaze downcast.

"I…apologise, Harry," Snape said, startling Harry enough to make him look up. "I did not realise today's exercise would be such a trial for you."

"It's—" Harry said, but it came out as that mute whisper again, so he cleared his throat in frustration. "It's fine," he managed to say, his voice more or less normal, though it was a bit shaky.

“What was wrong? I understand that it would be uncomfortable for anyone, unless that person is extremely self-absorbed, but it would not usually cause such extreme discomfort.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s just—embarrassing, I suppose,” he said weakly. “I don’t fare well with compliments.”

“Do you believe the information relayed to be untrue?”

“It’s not that,” he said, staring fixedly at his thumb. “It’s just—compliments make me uncomfortable, is all.”

“I see,” Snape said, before lapsing into silence for a few thoughtful moments. “Is it a case of having your self-esteem torn down by someone? Do you believe yourself undeserving?”

“Something like that,” Harry conceded. He wasn’t sure, but what he did know was that it was easier for him to take a punch than a genuine compliment.

“You feel shame about your person, despite being confident in yourself,” Snape stated as if it were a fact. “Or, better yet, you have been conditioned to feel shame about yourself, despite not actually being ashamed.”

“That’s—that’s more it, I think,” Harry said faintly. “I never believed anything my Uncle, or any of them, had to say, but I think it still wormed its way into my mind.”

“Which is completely natural,” Professor Snape said calmly. When Harry looked up at him he was smiling kindly—as much as he could, which was actually more of a grimace. “I’ll let you go, Harry. Think on what your friends have said, it’s important to know that people love us for who we are.”

“I will, Professor,” Harry said as he got up, his voice still sounding a bit faint.

“Again, I apologise, Harry. I did not expect it to be so harrowing for you.”

“It’s okay,” he said, smiling up at him as best he could, “you meant well.”

Snape gave him a tight smile, nodding once in his direction. “Goodbye, Harry.”

“Bye Professor,” Harry replied, feeling as if he’d aged ten years between the moment he’d stepped over the threshold of the door half an hour prior and then.

He shut the door behind himself, the latch clicking softly, and almost jumped out of his skin when he spotted Tom leaning against the wall, waiting for him.

Warmth blossomed in Harry’s chest, and he almost choked on it.

“Are you alright?” Tom asked, eyes scanning Harry’s face in scrutiny.

“Fine,” he said, “just tired.”

“Come on,” Tom said, gesturing for them to leave.

Harry went, leaning gratefully into Tom when one of his arms settled around his shoulders.

“I’ll make you some coffee when we get back,” Tom said, smiling down at him. “And then we’ll do some piano, okay?”

Harry felt his lingering shame peeling away from him as he looked up at Tom, an easy smile settling onto his lips. “That sounds great.”

“Good,” Tom said, arm tightening around Harry’s shoulders.

How could Harry not be in love with him?

— Scene three —

When Friday rolled around, they all traipsed up to the castle, somewhat reluctantly, with steaming mugs of coffee in their hands. It would undoubtedly be a long morning. It was likely every sixth and fifth year student would audition for their play, despite not knowing which parts they were auditioning for.

Harry was yawning as they got down to the hallway leading to the theatre, ambling along with Tom who looked ready to get down to business in his slacks and crisp white shirt. He had the jumper he'd stolen from Harry on over his shirt, only the collar of it peaking out. He looked so good, like a sexy Professor or something, Harry thought as he glanced his way again.

When they got to the theatre's doors, there was, in fact, the entirety of years five and six present. They all looked antsy and nervous, though they were well dressed, eager to make a good impression.

"Morning everyone," Theo said as Tom opened the doors. "Not too early, I hope?"

"Morning, Theo," Margaux said, rolling her eyes at him.

"Come in," Tom said, opening the doors and walking through. Harry went with him, walking into the cold and empty theatre. "Sit down, everyone, I'll explain a couple things before we get started. Here, Harry, sit at the desk with me."

"What about us?" Theo complained, while Harry's heart rate kicked up.

"There are other seats at the desk, just sit down," Tom said, sounding exasperated. "And when they're full just sit in the first row. I just meant I wanted to sit at the desk with Harry."

Harry sat down on one of the end seats, leaving the middle open for Tom. He didn't take it though, instead going to sit on the edge of the stage, facing the students filing into the theatre and sitting down.

When everyone was seated and the quiet returned, Tom cleared his throat.

"Thank you all for coming," he said. "Are all the fifth and sixth year students present?"

"Yes, I think so," Margaux said after raising her hand.

"Good. Are there any fourth years? Raise your hands," Tom said, pausing as he looked over the people gathered. "Okay, a few, that's good."

There were about twenty five people waiting to audition. Which was a lot.

"Obviously you don't know what roles you're auditioning for, and you won't know unless you get the part," Tom said, crossing his arms. "We can tell you now though that there are seven parts that need filling, one of them being an extremely minor female part, another two

are also female roles, and the other four male. In addition to those we will need approximately eight more people as background characters in one of the scenes of the play. We probably won't decide on those today, as we prefer to focus on the active roles that need filling. What else?" He paused, clicking his tongue in thought. "You can audition with whatever you want, just try not to go over one minute. Any fifth and sixth years who do not get roles in the play will still be working on it as stage directors. However, any people who work on the seventh year play must respect the secrecy around it. Understand that this is our work, and we want it to go as smoothly as possible, anyone who divulges any information about it to other students will be recast, in the case they are acting in it, or simply sent off the direction team. Any questions?"

He paused for a beat of silence, eyes raking across everyone gathered, before he pushed off the stage. "Good, let's get started then. We'll start with the sixth years and go in alphabetical order, if you don't mind."

Harry filed through their papers on the desk, looking for the list of sixth year students while Tom took his seat beside him. "Er—first is Viola Carrow, if you're ready," he said, twisting in his seat to find her among the people gathered, flashing her a small smile.

She looked nervous but she got up and climbed onto the stage. Harry sat back in his seat, looking up at her attentively.

*

The morning wore on, audition after audition taking place in front of them. They each jotted down notes about each one, intending to compare when it was all over and come to a consensus that way.

Soon, the sixth and fifth years were finished, leaving only the few fourth years.

Harry stretched, stifling a yawn. "For the fourth years wanting to audition we don't have a list to call you from, so you can take it in turns, just state your name before you start," he said, trying to be encouraging.

It must have been awfully nerve-wracking getting onstage before them.

"I can go first," a girl said after looking at her friends. She was a small thing, her voice quiet but melodious.

"What's your name?" Harry asked kindly once she was onstage. She looked tiny up there.

"Erm—Lysandra Gallagher," she said quietly, her eyes flitting about anxiously.

"What will you be auditioning with, Lysandra?" Harry asked, hoping she wasn't too nervous.

"I—er—I was going to do Antigone's final monologue?" she said, the statement coming out as a question.

Harry laughed, surprised. "Brilliant," he said happily, "I auditioned for the school with that."

“Oh yeah,” Theo said from beside him, “you told us that. You’ll be an expert judge then.”

Harry smiled up at Lysandra who looked both more nervous and a bit relieved. “Go ahead,” he said to her.

She took a deep breath before launching into the speech.

Harry paid particular attention to her, and when she’d finished, he circled her name on his piece of paper. She was good for her age, and she’d be perfect for the small role of the servant in Act two.

The other three fourth years auditioned after that, and Harry sighed in relief when it was done.

“Okay,” Tom said as he got up, going back to sit on the edge of the stage, “we’re going to need some time to deliberate. Feel free to leave the theatre, we’ll reconvene in twenty minutes with our final decision.”

Students started to stand up and file out of the theatre, while Tom came back to the desk.

“Fancy a smoke, Professor?” Harry asked teasingly as he stood up, stretching his hands above his head.

“Professor?” Tom echoed, looking amused.

“You look like one, and you sound like one,” Harry said, his stance edging on flirty before he corrected it.

“Well, watch out, yawn one more time and I’m giving you detention,” Tom teased, cocking an eyebrow.

Harry blushed. How could he not?

“Shut up,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Smoke?”

“Yeah, come on. We can talk about the casting outside,” he agreed, folding his piece of paper up and slipping it into his pocket.

They made their way outside, the students that had auditioned both avoiding them and trying to catch their eyes.

“Right,” Alphard said once they were outside and he’d lit his cigarette, “what do we think?”

“I retained Margaux and Viola for Lady Rosamund and Lady Priscilla,” Tom said, unfolding his notes.

“Same,” Harry said, smiling at him.

“I quite liked what Samantha did,” Gaspar said. “I put her down for Lady Priscilla instead of Viola.”

“Yeah, I hesitated with Sam, too,” Rick said, smoke unfurling from his mouth as he spoke. “But if I had to choose I’d go with Viola. We know she’s really good, and she’s great to work with.”

“Yeah, but it wouldn’t hurt to give Sam a try,” Gaspar replied.

“If we’re basing it purely on this audition, Viola was better, in my opinion,” Harry said, tapping the ash off his cigarette.

“Who votes Viola?” Theo asked, raising his hand. “Abraxas you’re not allowed to vote because you fancy her, you’re biassed.”

Abraxas spluttered while they laughed at him. They all raised their hands except for Gaspar.

He shrugged though. “That’s fine,” he said. “I don’t mind, Viola was really good too.”

“Okay good, so Viola and Margaux for the female roles. What about Marcel and William? I thought Louis and George in fifth year stood out,” Tom said, one hand in his trouser pocket as he smoked.

“Yeah, that’s fine by me,” Theo said, coughing into his hand.

“I’d thought of Ben in sixth,” Rick said.

“I put Ben down too,” Harry said, looking at his paper, “but Louis and George together would be good for the roles, I hadn’t thought of it.”

“Yeah, I’m thinking Louis and George too,” Alphard said.

“Me too,” Gaspar said as he stretched.

“Same,” Abraxas agreed.

“Well, that’s fine by me then,” Rick conceded.

“Good,” Tom said. “And the guards?”

“Well, we could use Ben for one of them,” Harry suggested, sniffing around the cold that was making his nose run.

Alphard hummed. “Jamie from sixth could be the other. I thought his audition was good.”

“Did anyone have anyone else down?” Tom asked. “I’d put Ben and Jamie aside as well.”

“Sounds good,” Rick said, nodding.

“Yeah, there weren’t any other standouts for me,” Theo said, “I’m good with whoever.”

The others agreed, nodding along.

“Okay, good,” Tom said. “And, what about the servant?”

“I thought Lysandra in fourth was great,” Harry said quickly.

“A fourth year?” Theo said, sounding surprised.

“That’s not a bad thing,” Tom said, assessing Harry. “I liked her too, I think we should go with her.”

“Fine by me,” Alphard said. “It’s a bit of a shit role to give to a sixth year anyway, might as well have them do stage directions. But I bet she’ll be over the moon.”

“I agree, she was good,” Gaspar said.

“Everyone else agree?” Tom asked, and they all nodded. “Brilliant then, that’s sorted. We’ll keep our second picks in mind just in case we need them, okay?”

“Yep,” Harry said, squashing his cigarette under his shoe. “Shall we go back?”

They headed back inside, into the theatre where all the students were already waiting anxiously.

Tom took his seat on the edge of the stage again and cleared his throat. “We’ve come to a decision. Don’t be too disappointed if you didn’t get picked. I’ll call the names of the people who will be cast who will stay back with us for a few minutes. The others, you’ll be free to go, though for the fifth and sixth years, remember the meeting we have scheduled on the 2nd. Now, Margaux and Viola from sixth year, as well as Ben and Jamie. Louis and George from fifth, and Lysandra from fourth.”

There were some disappointed sounds coming from the students, and Harry felt a twinge of sympathy as he saw some faces fall—people he knew were good as he’d worked with them on *Hamlet*.

“Thank you all for taking the time to audition, we do appreciate it,” Tom added as everyone started getting up.

Harry saw Margaux and Viola share a victorious high five, Ben and Jamie looked happy, Louis and George looked somewhat starstruck, and Lysandra seemed rooted to her seat.

As everyone filed out though, she got up and walked over to the front row briskly, eyes wide.

“Me?” she asked as she got to their level, looking between Harry and Tom.

“Yep,” Harry said with a laugh. “Stay back for a few minutes, okay?”

“Yeah—yes, brilliant,” she said, sounding a bit breathless. She was clearly biting down her excitement, and it made Harry smile. She stood off to the side, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“What are we doing this afternoon?” Alphard asked, kicking his feet up onto the back of Harry’s seat, prompting him to turn around.

“I dunno. Why couldn’t we do the auditions this afternoon instead of this morning?” Rick asked, stifling a yawn behind his hand.

“Sixth years have Snape this afternoon, he wouldn’t fucking budge on it,” Theo replied, rolling his eyes.

“Anyone fancy the pub this afternoon? You know, the one in the village,” Gaspar proposed.

“I am not setting foot in that pub again,” Tom declared from where he was still sitting on the stage. His eyes found Harry’s and they shared an amused smile.

Harry hummed. “If those guys were there again we’d be done for.”

“Did you piss them off?” Rick asked.

“Oh, no, no,” Harry said, laughing. “No, we just embarrassed ourselves.”

“Very thoroughly,” Tom said, getting off the stage. Everyone had filed out, aside from the students they’d asked to stay behind, now standing by the stage. “Right, let’s see,” he said, digging through his bag.

“Congratulations, first of all,” Theo said, standing up and rounding the desk.

“Thanks,” Margaux said brightly. “It’ll be great working with you all again.”

“Yeah, I can’t wait,” Viola said, a blush high on her cheekbones.

“Have you done your auditions for your play?” Alphard asked curiously.

“Yeah, last week,” Margaux replied.

“What have you got this year?” Gaspar asked curiously.

“We’re doing *Love’s Labour’s Lost*,” Margaux said.

“Oh, great,” Theo said, nodding approvingly. “What about you?” he asked, turning to the fifth years. “Historical play, right? Which one are you doing?”

“We’ve got *Pericles*,” Louis said, looking shy, “we had our auditions before the holidays.”

“That’s a good one,” Rick said.

“You auditioned for *Hamlet* with something from *Pericles*, didn’t you, Theo?” Harry said, looking up at him as he balanced his chair on its hind legs.

“Yep,” Theo said, looking back at the fifth years. “I love that play, can’t wait to come and watch you do it.”

“What about in fourth year?” Harry asked, looking between his friends and Lysandra. “Do you have a play for that year?”

“Yes,” Lysandra said timidly. “We’re doing parts of *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry.”

“You don’t do the whole thing?”

“No, not enough people, not enough time to allocate to production,” Abraxas said. “Priority goes to fifth, sixth, and seventh years.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “That’s a shame, I like that play.”

“We read it in fourth year I think, but we didn’t play it,” Theo said, frowning in thought, “I had this copy where there was a portrait of the author in it—”

“Oh, shut up,” Alphard cut in, “I know what you’re gonna say.”

“He was fit,” Theo said, undeterred, startling a laugh out of Harry.

“You’re out of your mind,” Gaspar laughed.

“Shut up, Theo,” Tom said, sorting out his things and straightening out, turning back to the students. “Here you go,” he said, handing out the printed version of the play. It wasn’t a booklet like they all had, just normal sized paper bound together. “This is the play. It most likely won’t be the final version we play in June, as we’ll probably change some minor things, but this is it. Don’t lose these, don’t get them stolen, don’t show them to anyone. I mean that.”

Harry smiled at the intimidated looks on their faces at Tom’s serious tone.

“Margaux, you’re going to be Lady Rosamund, Viola, you’re Lady Priscilla,” Tom said. “Ben and Jamie, you’re guards, I’ll let you pick who wants to be who. Louis, you’re Marcel, George, you’re William, and Lysandra, you unfortunately have the very small role of a servant who appears in Act two. I hope you aren’t too disappointed. We really don’t have many roles to fill outside of our main ones.”

“No,” Lysandra said quickly. “No, I’m not disappointed at all! Thank you for choosing me.” She was holding onto her copy of the play as if it was something precious.

“Good,” Tom said, indulging her with a small smile. “Read it at your leisure. We’ll start first reads in February, so you’ve got a bit of time to read it. I marked on your character lists who is playing who, to help give you a visual when you’re reading.”

“Thanks, Tom,” Viola said, smiling up at him in a friendly way. Harry bit his cheek.

He nodded in her direction. “You won’t be expected to attend every single repetition. We know that you all have a lot going on outside of this play, and with you having very minor roles, it doesn’t matter if you miss out sometimes, especially in the early months of rehearsals.”

“Can we still come though?” Lysandra asked hopefully. “Erm—if I’m not supposed to be onstage for example, can I still come and see the rehearsal?”

“Yes, of course,” Tom said, assessing her, a tinge of approval in his eyes. “You are part of the production, if you have time, you can attend every single meeting, rehearsal, and whatever else we have to do, like costume fittings, for instance.”

“It’s not expected of us, though, is it?” George asked tentatively.

“No,” Tom said simply. “Like I said, we know how busy you are. We will tell you in advance which days you have to attend though. We can relay information to you if you want, concerning meeting dates, things like that. And if you need anything, you can always come and find us in the chapel.”

Lysandra raised her hand timidly, her eyes alight with excitement.

“Yes?” Tom prompted.

“Could I have the dates for the meetings?” she asked.

“Yes,” Tom said, turning towards Harry. “Can you write the dates down for her, the ones we have so far, anyway.”

“‘Course,” Harry said happily. He dropped his chair back onto all its legs and scribbled the dates on a piece of paper that he handed to Lysandra.

“I think that’s it for today then,” Tom said, looking around at them for anything else.

“Shouldn’t we introduce ourselves?” Gaspar said. “I mean, we know Viola, Margaux, Ben, and Jamie, but we haven’t had the chance to work with Louis, George, and Lysandra.”

“I suppose,” Tom conceded with a nod. “I’m Tom,” he added, turning back to the students. “Tom Riddle, I’ll be playing Alarik in the play.”

“I’m Gaspar Avery, and I’ll be playing Delancey,” he said with a smile.

“Theodore Nott, but you can call me Theo.” He was leaning on the desk and flashing them a smile. “I’ll be playing Fidel.”

The younger years were nodding along, looking relieved to be getting official introductions.

“Richard Lestrange, or Rick if you prefer. I’ll be playing Alessandro.”

Lysandra flicked open to the character page of her script.

“I’m Abraxas Malfoy, I’ll be playing Lamont.”

“Alphard Black, I’ll be Lennon.”

They turned to Harry expectantly, and he smiled at them. “Harry, Harry Potter,” he greeted. “I’ll be playing Elio.” His eyes drifted to Tom as he said it, as if it were a secret, something he wasn’t allowed to admit aloud.

“Good,” Tom said, smiling at him. “Like I said, if you have any questions come and find us. We’ll be focusing on our work with the art students until we start repetitions. Try and get us a copy of your schedules if you can, so we have an idea of your availability. And, sorry to say this, but we’ll be doing a lot of rehearsals in the evening.”

“That’s fine,” Margaux said.

“Good, well, that’s it for today,” Tom said, picking his things up.

Harry followed suit, standing up and rounding the desk to stand next to him.

“Okay, we’ll see you later,” Viola said, smiling at them before she turned around with the other sixth years in tow. “And thanks!”

“Thank you,” Louis said, his eyes wide. “Bye.”

“Uhm—how will you let me know if you need me?” Lysandra asked.

“If we don’t see you we’ll put something in your letterbox,” Alphard explained. “So be sure to check that often.”

“I’ll put something in there whenever we have a new date to add to that piece of paper I gave you,” Harry told her. “You can choose whether you come along for all that or not.”

“Okay!” she said, eyes bright. “Thank you for picking me. I’ll see you later.”

“Bye!” Harry called after her.

“D’you think she’s related to Liam Gallagher?” Alphard asked curiously once she’d gone with the others, leaving them alone in the empty, cavernous room.

“I hadn’t thought of that, we’ll have to ask her,” Theo said, looking back at where she’d disappeared.

“My mum’s friends with Liam Gallagher,” Rick commented.

“She reminded me of Tom a bit,” Abraxas said with a grin.

“Me?” Tom said, frowning.

“Yeah,” Abraxas said as he gathered his things up and they set off. “You know, always very eager to be a part of everything. You were in a seventh year play in second year.”

“You were?” Harry asked, looking up at him.

“They needed a kid,” Tom said, his cheekbones pink.

“You stole the show, Tommy boy,” Theo teased.

“Don’t call me that,” Tom groaned, pushing him into the doorframe as they left the theatre.

“Ow!” Theo laughed, catching back up. “I’m being serious, you stole the show.”

“Shut up,” Tom said, rolling his eyes.

Harry grinned up at him, fascinated. Maybe that was why he’d taken to Lysandra so much, because he saw a bit of Tom in her.

— Scene four —

“Well boys,” Professor McGonagall said, “anything in particular you want to do today?”

It was already February, and the meeting with the sixth and fifth years had gone well. They’d handed them all their own copies of the play, as they had for the ones they’d chosen for the extra parts, and they managed to set up a cohesive schedule to begin repetitions.

Lysandra had been more than happy to attend the meeting, and she’d shyly stumbled over compliments to the play she’d read many times in advance. The other extras had been delighted by their characters, especially Viola and Margaux who were over the moon to be playing gossiping ladies. They’d seemed relieved to have smaller parts in the play, and Harry couldn’t blame them when he realised exactly how much work they had to do outside of it.

“Actually, Professor,” Tom said, setting his bag down on the floor, “we do have some things we want to go over with you.”

“Oh, perfect!” Professor McGonagall said with a sigh of relief. “I’ve had enough of yoga. Tell me then, what do you need?”

“Well, we have to go over some blocking, I think,” Tom said carefully. Harry knew he was going over his words in his mind—to not give too much of the play away. “And there’s a er—dance sequence that we need to choreograph.”

“A dance sequence?” she asked, looking surprised.

The faintest blush appeared on Tom’s cheeks, and McGonagall’s eyes seemed to widen further. “Yes,” he said. “We need your help to choreograph it.”

“Alright,” she said. “I’m going to need more details, what kind of dance are you aiming for? Do you have the music for it? What are you trying to portray through this dance?”

“Er—” Tom said, looking at Harry— “it’ll be to classical music, piano, maybe violin,” he went on, looking unsure. “So, I don’t know—I’m thinking almost ballet-like in some movements but definitely not as complex.”

“What are you trying to portray with this dance, Tom?” McGonagall asked patiently.

“Almost a chase, I suppose,” Tom said, not quite looking at her. “Romantic, intimate, in nature.”

McGonagall narrowed her eyes as she regarded him, but she nodded. “I see. Okay,” she clapped, turning to face them all, “who is the dance between? The others you can practise blocking.”

“Me and Harry,” Tom said, gesturing between them.

“I see,” McGonagall said in a way that made Harry’s ears feel hot. “Come then, you two. The others, go to the other side of the room, figure out exactly what you need to practise, I’ll be with you in a moment.”

She took them to one side of the studio, where mirrors lined every wall and a piano stood in the corner. There was a ballet pole lining the mirrors, and bright lights shining from above.

“Alright, shoes off, coats off,” she instructed, “that goes for that jumper, Potter.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry said dutifully, ignoring the butterflies in his stomach. He couldn’t help but think about how Tom had led him in a dance during their first lesson with McGonagall, and how lovely Tom’s hands had felt on him.

They discarded their shoes and coats by the wall, laughing when Harry gripped Tom’s arm when he almost tripped kicking a shoe off. It dispelled some of the tension between them, and Harry felt like he could breathe a bit better.

“Do you have anything in mind? Anything at all?” McGonagall asked once they were in their socks in front of her, her arms crossed across her chest.

“I do, a bit,” Tom said uncertainly.

“You do?” Harry asked, looking up at him. He frankly hadn’t been able to think about the dance at all, too caught between embarrassment, excitement, and dread.

“Go on then,” McGonagall said. “I am assuming you are leading, Tom.”

“Right,” he said, swallowing. Harry's eyes followed the motion, snapping up when he realised Tom was looking at him. “Follow my lead?”

“‘Course,” Harry managed to say, unsure of how he’d pull this off.

Tom looked at him, the weight of his stare heavy on Harry’s shoulders, before he huffed. “This is more complicated than I thought,” he mumbled. “Gaspar! Gaspar, we need you at the piano.”

“Coming!” Gaspar shouted before coming over to their side of the room. “Thank God, I hate blocking. What do you need me to play?”

“Er—” Tom blanched, clicking his tongue in thought— “*Rêverie*, it’ll do.”

“Debussy?” Gaspar asked.

“Yes,” Tom said, clearing his throat as he turned back to Harry. “Okay, pretend you’re running away from me.”

“What?” Harry said, frowning. Tom’s cheeks were positively red by then.

“It’s playful—not, like that, or whatever you were thinking,” he said, nose scrunching up.

“Oh—oh, okay,” Harry said, feeling stupid. “Okay, whenever you’re ready.”

Tom took a quick breath before nodding. “Okay, Gaspar you can start.”

Gaspar started playing, the notes ringing out against the mirrors, and Harry turned his back to Tom with a bemused smile before running off.

He only got a few steps before Tom’s arms were around his waist, hauling him back in.

“Lean against my shoulder,” Tom whispered in his ear, “and take my hand.”

Harry’s smile was wiped off his face, his cheeks heating up, his chest heaving. He couldn’t speak, only let Tom’s fingers thread between his own on his waist, before he was spun out and dragged back in until they were chest to chest, Harry looking up at him through his lashes.

Tom’s lips were parted, his eyes wide, his breathing unsteady. His hands crept up to Harry’s ribs, until he was being dipped back—back, back—until his hair was almost touching the floor, his back arched in a perfect bow. Tom’s nose was pressed against his sternum, their whole bodies flush.

Tom pulled him back up slowly, sensually, keeping them close.

They just looked at each other for a second, Harry somehow having ended up on his tiptoes with his arms looped around Tom’s shoulders.

The moment broke when Tom cleared his throat and said, “I’m unsure of what to do from here.”

Gaspar stopped playing at the words, and Harry laughed, the air leaving his lungs in a breathy exhale. He grinned up at Tom, body relaxing as he fell back onto the soles of his feet, his hands leaving Tom’s shoulders and travelling down his arms.

“Seems like a good start,” he said in a small voice, feeling his neck burn.

“Right,” McGonagall said, drawing attention back to herself. Harry’s hands fell away from Tom’s body, though one of Tom’s hands remained on his waist. “I see what you’re going for, and I think I can build on this. Will you be sticking with this piano piece? It is vital that you know what music to dance to.”

“What do you think?” Tom asked, turning to look down at Harry.

“I’m okay with it if you are,” he replied with a smile.

“Yes then, I think we’ll keep this one,” Tom said.

“Good,” McGonagall said, stepping closer to them. “Portraying intimacy through a dance is all about the pacing. You want to alternate between fast movements and exceedingly slow ones. You almost did that just then, but you were too hesitant. I think we need to work on an exercise in being comfortable before we can move forth.”

“What do you mean, Professor?” Tom asked, frowning in her direction.

“It is not as easy as one would think to dance in such a manner with just anyone,” she said, her hands held behind her back, “you need to be wholly comfortable with one another. You can’t be blushing bumbling idiots onstage.”

Harry blushed, and when he looked up, Tom was blushing too.

“As you practise more and more, it will come naturally. But that doesn’t mean you can’t work on it now. There are a few exercises that can speed the process along, which should help you and make this less uncomfortable,” she added.

Harry wouldn’t necessarily class dancing with Tom as uncomfortable. It was more so that it was so charged in sexual tension—on his end of the stick, anyway—that it made it hard to breathe, making his movements awkward.

“What exercises?” Tom asked, looking sceptical. “I’m sure it’s just because it’s the first time we’re trying it. Harry and I get on well, it’s not that it’s uncomfortable—just a bit awkward, with neither of us being dancers.”

“That will be less obvious if you can be convincing,” McGonagall countered. “And to be convincing, you have to be comfortable, you have to dare to go that extra mile.”

“Alright,” Tom said, eyes narrowed.

“So, for the first exercise,” she said, something like an amused smile fighting to get onto her lips, “you will stand nose to nose, for thirty seconds.”

“What?” Harry said, before he could stop himself. A nervous laugh bubbled up his throat, escaping him as he looked up at Tom.

“Nose to nose, thirty seconds,” McGonagall repeated.

Tom’s gaze was shifty, and he exhaled heavily before finally looking at Harry and shrugging. “Come on then,” he said, taking a step closer.

“You’re gonna have to lean down,” Harry said, though it came out as a whisper, the proximity making him feel like he was being too loud.

“Forget how short you are,” Tom mumbled as he leant down.

“Shut up,” Harry managed to snipe back good-naturedly, trying desperately to ignore what was going on, pretending it was normal.

When their noses touched, Harry flinched back.

“Sorry,” he murmured, leaning back in. He fought the urge to lick his lips, feeling dizzy with the knowledge that if he did, his tongue would catch on Tom’s lips for how close they were.

It was torture, absolute torture. Harry wanted him—*desperately*. Harry was *in love with him*; it was the height of cruelty to put him so close, to dangle everything he'd ever wanted right under his nose—

Tom's hands were on his cheeks, forcing him to look up. "Stop fidgeting," he whispered, keeping him steady.

Harry swallowed as he had no choice but to gaze into Tom's eyes. They were wide, the pupils dilating and retracting each time Harry blinked, eclipsing the flecks of gold, only to have them reappear a second later. Tom's stare was intense, his eyes seeming almost *hungry* in the way they fixed Harry's.

Harry felt nervous under the scrutiny, with the proximity—his stomach was in knots, and he swayed forward a bit, catching himself on Tom's chest, fingers bunching up the fabric of his —*Harry's*—t-shirt. He laughed, unable to stop the stupid giddy feeling bubbling up.

"Oh, don't start," Tom whispered, breath fanning over Harry's mouth. His voice was amused, his shoulders shaking with a laugh he tried to contain, his fingers sneaking into Harry's hair.

Harry took a deep breath, closing his eyes to try and stop the laughter. When he opened them again his eyes crossed, looking down at their noses still touching, and it was Tom who laughed, colour high on his cheeks, eyes creasing, dimples apparent. Their noses bumped into each other as they laughed, which only made them laugh more.

"Alright, time's up," McGonagall said.

They separated slowly, their giggles sticking to them. Tom unwound his fingers from Harry's hair, and Harry loosened his grip on his t-shirt, before they both took a small step back. Harry felt almost sick with the all-consuming feeling of Tom.

"That wasn't too bad," McGonagall said, sounding amused. "Now, for the second exercise."

Harry cleared his throat, chasing away the remnants of his giggles. Tom straightened out next to him, running a thumb across his bottom lip.

"Tom, close your eyes, and stand still," she instructed.

"Er—what?" he said.

"You need to trust Harry—"

"I do," Tom said immediately, almost defensively, and Harry's heart clenched.

"—which is why you need to close your eyes," McGonagall said with a pointed look.

Tom rolled his eyes. "Okay," he said, eyes drifting over to Harry before they fluttered shut.

"Good," she said, nodding in his direction. "Harry—"

“Yeah,” he said, wrenching his eyes away from the way Tom’s tongue swiped over his bottom lip.

“You are going to familiarise yourself with the feel of Tom’s body,” she declared, and Harry went stock still.

“I’m sorry?” he said, swallowing against the sudden dryness of his mouth.

“When dancing, you are constantly touching. It will not do if those touches are hesitant and awkward, you must be confident with it.”

“Won’t it come with time?” Harry asked, his voice a higher pitch than he would’ve liked.

“It’s easier to do it this way,” McGonagall said. “It will save you many unnecessary awkward attempts.”

“But—” *we already know each other’s bodies quite well*, was what he wanted to say. It was true, he knew how Tom’s body felt pressed against his, curled around him as they slept. He knew what Tom’s fingers felt like along his back, knew the weight of his thigh resting across his own leg. He knew what Tom’s stomach felt like under his hand, knew the rhythm his heart beat at when he was asleep, knew exactly how broad his back was, how he liked when Harry trailed his fingers along the veins in his forearms.

“I’m not going to molest him,” was what Harry ended up saying, cheeks flaming, his chest feeling hot and itchy.

McGonagall rolled her eyes. Gaspar sent him an amused but sympathetic look from over by the piano. Tom snorted.

“I consent to the exercise,” he said from beside Harry, amusement in his voice despite the flush running all down his neck, blotchy and enticing.

Harry made a distressed sort of noise that he did his best to bite back, before huffing. “Fine,” he said, avoiding McGonagall’s eyes.

He turned back to Tom, thankful for the distance they were standing at from all the others, allowing him to pretend it was just the two of them. He reached out and brushed Tom’s wrist with his fingers, letting him know he was there. Tom’s wrist twitched under his touch.

He took a step closer, holding his breath as he let his fingers run up the length of his arm.

The others were being loud at the other side of the room, laughing raucously as they practised blocking, and Harry almost missed Tom’s whisper of, “It’s nothing you haven’t done before.”

Harry’s hand stilled, the breath knocked out of him. They never acknowledged the soft touches they shared with each other when they were lying in bed together.

He hummed, just to acknowledge what Tom had said, before getting both hands on him. It was a heady thing, having Tom’s skin under his fingers. He trailed them up his exposed arms until he got to the hem of the t-shirt sleeves, skittering up, thumbing at his exposed

collarbones. He ran his hands up his neck, his throat, before coming up to his face, feeling the heat of his blush through his fingers. Tom's breath hitched when Harry brushed a thumb across his bottom lip.

He swallowed, letting his hands run back down. "This is my t-shirt," he said, just to expel the suffocating tension in his throat, as his hands ran across the fabric.

"It's your dad's, actually," Tom murmured breathlessly, his eyes still firmly squeezed shut.

Harry swallowed, a small smile spreading across his lips. "Hm, I suppose it is," he said, feeling bolder, pinching Tom's waist when he got there.

Tom squirmed a bit, his teeth sinking into his bottom lip.

Harry was mesmerised by it, letting his fingers sneak under the t-shirt, thumbs tracing the V of his stomach. He rounded Tom's body, hands lingering on his stomach, trailing them around to his back under the t-shirt. He took them out, away from the shivering skin, as he mapped out the expanse of his back with them.

Tom was tense, muscles fluttering under every one of Harry's touches, his breathing heavy in the small space between them.

Despite the exercise, Harry knew there were boundaries to not cross. When he brought his hands back down and circled back around to Tom's front, he resisted the very strong urge to feel up his arse.

When his hands were just resting on his hips, unsure of where to go from there, he cleared his throat and looked back over to McGonagall. "Is that okay?" he asked.

She gave him a once over, raising an eyebrow. "I do believe Mr. Riddle is the proud owner of *legs*, Potter."

Tom laughed lightly, his stomach flexing under Harry's fingers.

"Shut up," he said, pinching him again. He sighed, running his hands along his outer thighs, the soft material of his slacks creasing under his touch. He got as far down as he could, before he could no longer reach, and then, unthinkingly, he dropped to his knees.

And, honestly, *what the fuck*?

Harry stilled, realisation hitting him. He couldn't help it—he peaked up under his lashes, his glasses slipping down his nose. His grip on Tom's thighs became white-knuckled, a small gasp escaping him. He looked down quickly, running his hands along the length of Tom's legs, his breathing quick and shallow.

He was on his knees in front of Tom Riddle, *feeling him up*, in a room full of their friends with a Professor present.

"I think Tom's about to cum in his trousers," Theo said with a snicker, startling Harry back into awareness.

He was back on his feet in record time, head spinning a bit with the image of Tom looming above him, head tipped back, flush creeping down his neck.

“Fuck you,” Tom bit back, leaning into where Harry’s hands had found his waist again to steady himself.

“Mr. Nott, you have something to be doing,” McGonagall chided, pursing her lips in his direction.

“What are they even doing?” Theo asked, laughing.

“An exercise to get used to touching each other without it being awkward,” Gaspar explained from where he was still sitting at the piano, seemingly happy to just hang out.

Theo scoffed. “What do they need that for? They cuddle all the time.”

“We don’t cuddle,” Tom snapped at him. “Stop saying that.”

“I literally caught you cuddling.”

“No you fucking didn’t,” Harry huffed, cheeks burning. They did, in fact, cuddle, and Theo had caught them. Actually, it was becoming quite usual for them to *sleep* together. Waking up in Tom’s arms was something Harry associated more with a dream than real life.

Before any of them could anticipate anything, McGonagall’s fist landed in Theo’s stomach, knocking the breath out of him in a long wheeze. “I see you have not perfected your blocking,” she stated, “get back to it.”

“What?” Theo mumbled, hunched over himself and groaning in pain. “Okay, sorry.”

“Idiot,” Tom murmured under his breath as he watched Theo hobble off.

Harry smiled up at him, shaking his head, his thumbs having hooked themselves under his t-shirt, the pads digging into his hip dips gently.

“Your turn, Mr. Riddle,” McGonagall said, turning back to them. “Potter, close your eyes.”

Harry groaned, glaring at Tom’s amused smirk, before he closed his eyes. He dropped his hands from Tom’s body, quite reluctantly, until they hung awkwardly at his sides.

With his eyes closed, everything seemed louder, his own breathing particularly so. He couldn’t hear Tom, and he itched to reach out and check where he was.

The first touch, on his lower back, made him shiver.

Tom was standing behind him—*too close*—and Harry could feel his breathing against his neck, sending renewed shivers down his spine. His hands were moving up to his shoulder blades, a slow drag, unyielding, and Harry almost shook with it.

When he got to his nape, Tom dug his thumbs in a bit, and Harry held his breath. His hands were sweaty at his sides, and the inside of his cheeks almost bloody with how hard he was biting them. His eyes were squeezed shut, his breathing shallow.

He was tense all over, but when Tom brought a hand around to the front, wrapping his fingers around his throat, Harry tilted his head back, giving him more room. His jaw went slack and he sucked in a breath, his body leaning back until he hit Tom, a surrender of sorts.

The intimacy of the scene was surreal, and Harry couldn't focus on anything but the blood rushing in his ears, and the feel of Tom's hands exploring him.

His thumbs dug into the underside of his jaw, forcing his head back further. His fingers danced across his cheeks, teasing at his hairline, brushing across his lips.

When his hands moved down, Harry was sure Tom could feel the erratic beating of his heart through his t-shirt.

His hands moved, so sensually, across his ribs, down—*down, down*—until they reached his abdomen.

Harry's breath hitched as Tom bundled the fabric of his t-shirt up, until his fingers could skim the skin just above his waistband.

Harry felt hot all over, and he really wished Tom hadn't lifted his t-shirt, worried whatever was going on in his trousers would be obvious.

He lingered on his waistband for a few seconds, and Harry almost slapped his hand away—or begged him to just stick his hand *in*—but Tom moved on, for better or for worse. One of his hands skimmed over Harry's hip, going down on his thigh, while the other moved to his back, moving down to his thigh from there.

Tom wasn't as shy as Harry had been, and the hand at his back moved quite pointedly over his arse, until it got to his thigh, lingering more on the inside than the outside.

It took everything for Harry to not squirm, to not come undone under Tom's touch. It was *erotic*, and Harry was sure he wasn't the only one to experience it as such—not if Tom's shallow breathing was anything to go by, or the way his hands squeezed, or almost *teased*, depending on where he was touching.

Harry had tried so hard to get through this exercise with the most clinical detachment he could muster but this was too much. Having Tom touch him like this, his eyes closed, every other sense heightened, it was too much. He couldn't breathe properly, his stomach was in knots, there was a moan locked somewhere in his throat, and if Tom brushed against his inner thigh one more time it was going to come free, and—

"Okay?" Tom whispered in his ear, having stood back up properly at some point. A point that Harry must have missed, too caught up in his tortured thoughts.

He nodded stiffly, unsure of what his voice would sound like with Tom's hands resting on his hips like they belonged there. And the thing was, Tom had undoubtedly touched him in all these places before, but never with such undivided *intent*. It was usually an absentminded caress, an accidental brush. Not this intent to touch, and Harry was going mad with it.

"You can open your eyes," Tom murmured, but he was still pressed to Harry's back—or Harry was pressed to his front, it was unclear who was doing the pressing.

Reluctantly, he cracked his eyes open, his breath catching when he came face to face with himself in the mirror. Tom had his chin resting on his head, a hand splayed possessively on his stomach, and a certain glint in his eyes that made Harry swallow nervously.

Harry himself was blushing violently, all the way down into his t-shirt, though there was a pink flush on Tom's cheeks as well, making it a bit better.

And Harry—Harry wondered, as he looked at Tom through their reflection, if this exercise was difficult for them, not because it was awkward to touch one another, but because they both wanted to touch each other *so desperately*, that, instead of it being uncomfortable, it was simply *intoxicating*. It wasn't that they wanted to touch less, but *more*—more, more, more, always more, never *enough*.

When he saw the same glint as Tom reflected in his own eyes, he was almost sure he was right.

A smile broke out onto his lips, and he looked up at Tom by tilting his head back into his chest, his hands finding his wrists, and he laughed—it was stupid, but it broke the suffocating tension between them, and Tom's touch no longer felt like a brand, but just his usual touch.

Tom laughed down at him too, his grin bright, his eyes creasing at the corners. He grabbed Harry's hand and spun him around, knocking another laugh out of him. "Ready to dance, then?" he asked when they were chest to chest, his smile still in place.

"You're an idiot," Harry said, his thumb stroking Tom's hand in his. His smile was one of those that you can't help, a reluctant one that pulled his cheeks taught until they ached, and he knew his eyes were shining with all the fondness and *love* he had in him for Tom. And maybe it was wishful thinking, but he thought he caught a glimpse of the same thing reflected in his eyes.

"You did well, boys," McGonagall said, inserting herself into their bubble again. "Why don't you show me the beginning of the dance again, and we'll see what we can add on."

Harry turned in his hold as Tom gestured for Gaspar to play, and ran a couple steps, looking over his shoulder just as Tom caught him by the waist, hauling him back into his chest.

Knowing what to expect, Harry leant into it, his back arching under Tom's touch as he laid his head back onto his shoulder. Tom leant down and nosed at his temple, before spinning him out and pulling him back in to the rhythm of the piano.

“Very good,” McGonagall said, “we’ll make fine dancers out of you yet, boys. Now, let’s see how we can choreograph this.”

— Scene five —

They ended up staying in McGonagall's studio until lunch, the other boys having long gone back to the chapel, except Gaspar who offered to stay and play the piano for them.

They had the majority of the choreography done, thanks to Professor McGonagall, who told them to figure the rest out themselves, despite looking like she really wanted to see the finished product with them.

"We'll make it more personal," Tom said over lunch, as he wrote down all the movements on a piece of paper between him and Harry. "I didn't want to give too much away to her, we just needed general direction."

Even hours later, Harry wasn't entirely sure what he might have meant by that. He lingered on the thought of it while he was in the shower, but came to the conclusion that anything involving being 'more personal' with Tom was something he was on board with. The hand wrapped around his cock was more than happy to agree with him.

When he got back downstairs, it was to the sound of someone playing the piano on and off.

"What're you smiling about?" Theo asked when he stepped through the doorway to the library.

"What?" Harry said, looking at them all gathered around the table. Only Tom and Gaspar were missing. "Not allowed to be happy or something?"

"Shower wank that good?" Theo teased, getting a snicker out of the rest of them.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Piss off. We all wank in the shower, it's nothing to alert the news about."

"I don't," Theo stated, "not always, anyway. I do it at night when Abraxas is sleeping."

"Oh, god," Abraxas said, his nose turned up in disgust. "Alphard, can I please come and live with you, I can't stand him anymore."

"Nope," Alphard said. "I like my privacy."

"I would like some too," Abraxas mumbled.

"Where's Tom, anyway?" Harry asked, looking around curiously.

"It's him at the piano," Theo said, gesturing to the corner that was just out of Harry's line of sight.

"Oh, I thought it was Gaspar," Harry said before heading over to the piano. "What're you up to?" he asked when he got to him.

Tom turned to look at him, a smile forming on his face as he stretched, patting the stool as he shuffled to the side a bit, beckoning him over. “You smell nice,” he commented when Harry sat down. “Shower?”

“Yep,” Harry said, angling his body toward him a bit. “What’re you doing?”

“I thought I might try my hand at composing something for the ball scene of the play,” Tom explained, showing Harry the piece of sheet music he was filling out with pencil.

“Oh, wow,” Harry said, genuinely impressed. “Let’s have a listen then.”

“There’s not much to go off yet, though I have the general kind of baseline,” he said, fingers resting on the keys. “It’s a bit of a tricky one though, and it’s difficult to build on it when I have to carry on doing the baseline.”

“Show me,” Harry prompted, “maybe I can do it for you while you tinker about.”

“Okay,” Tom said with a smile. He pressed the sequence of keys down rhythmically, and Harry tried to memorise the rhythm. “Do you think you can do that for me?”

“‘Course,” Harry said, sure, in that moment, that he could accomplish anything Tom asked him to.

“Okay, here, let me show you.”

He took Harry’s hand in his gently, placing his fingers over the keys like he always did, ‘*training his muscle memory*,’ as he always said.

“You can use both hands if you need to,” he added when Harry’s fingers kept slipping from one of the keys. He took Harry’s other hand in his and helped him play with both hands. “That’s good,” he said, letting go and watching Harry do it for a second, “just try and keep the rhythm the same, okay?”

Tom’s left hand rested on the keys on his side of the piano, while his right went to Harry’s thigh, his fingers tapping the rhythm into his skin. Harry almost faltered but caught himself in time.

“Less pressure,” Tom whispered, his head tilted towards the piano, listening intently, and Harry could only guess at what was going on in his mind.

Harry did as he was told though, pressing the keys down softer.

“Good,” Tom said, his hand tightening a bit on Harry’s thigh as he tapped the rhythm out, his own fingers pressing down the keys of the piano, adding to the baseline when Harry started the sequence again.

Tom mumbled under his breath a lot, saying variations of, “No, not that one,” and, “Other one maybe,” or, “Wrong timing.”

Harry found it wholly endearing, and kept his attention on him, finding he kept the rhythm better if he played mechanically instead of focusing on what he was doing.

“Okay, you can stop,” Tom said quietly after a few minutes, squeezing his thigh. He let go of Harry altogether and picked up his pencil, filling in the lines of his paper.

Harry watched him, content to just watch him do his thing. The way he hunched over the piano to scribble on the paper, always finding it oddly endearing how he was left handed; it made sense, in a strange way. The way the line of his jaw stuck out, how his lips parted in concentration.

“Alright, let’s see what this sounds like,” Tom said, propping the paper up in his line of sight on the music desk.

Harry shuffled over a bit to give him room to play on his own. Feeling bold, he, in turn, laid his hand on Tom’s thigh, his little finger catching on the inseam of his slacks.

Tom’s lips turned up in a small smile before he bit his bottom lip in concentration, fingers pressing down on the keys as he focused on the sheet music.

It was beautiful, and Harry was in awe at how he’d created the piece in little to no time.

He stopped abruptly, mumbled, “That’s not right,” and scribbled something else on his paper, before starting again.

Harry just watched, thumb tracing small patterns on his thigh. He could watch him for hours —*forever*, even. He was so beautiful in the light from the stained glass, the smell of books surrounding them. He could hear the others’ faint chatter, but it was drowned out by Tom’s playing. How his fingers moved across the keys, so elegant.

“You’re so talented,” Harry said, a dreamy quality to his voice, as he finished playing, looking satisfied.

Tom turned to him, a smattering of pink colouring his cheekbones, his smile crooked. He leant forward a bit, as if he was going to tell Harry a secret, and whispered, “I know,” which made the both of them laugh.

“A waltz?” Gaspar said curiously as he appeared by the piano. “It’s beautiful, did you just compose it?”

“I did,” Tom confirmed, nodding at him.

“Jesus, you’re good,” Gaspar said, grinning at him. “Can I see?”

Tom handed him the sheet music. “I couldn’t have done it without Harry’s invaluable help.”

“Shut up,” Harry said, pinching his arm. Gaspar was smiling at them, his eyes flitting back down to the sheet music.

“Actually,” Tom said after a few seconds, “I was thinking some violin wouldn’t go amiss, as an accompanying instrument. Can you play for me?”

“‘Course,” Gaspar agreed readily, handing back the sheet music. “It might take me a couple tries to get it right, you know Alphard’s a better player than me.”

“Yeah, but I can’t improvise that well!” Alphard called from the table.

“You can when you want to,” Gaspar said. “Can I borrow your violin anyway, Alphie?”

“Yeah, s’in my room.”

Gaspar came back down with Alphard’s fancy violin on his shoulder, warming up. Despite what he said, Harry thought he was very good. He’d always found the violin to be a very elusive instrument, one he could never quite understand the workings of.

“Don’t come in from the start,” Tom said, turning back to the piano, while Gaspar went to the other side of it so they could still see each other. “I’ll try and give you a cue.”

“Okay, anything in particular you want me to do?”

“Keep it quiet,” Tom said pensively, “it’s only backing the melody of the piano.”

Harry watched them practise, Gaspar’s brow pinching in concentration when he had to play. They stopped and started a lot, Tom giving Gaspar direction for what was good and what wasn’t.

They stayed at it for hours, Tom perfecting the piano piece, and Gaspar perfecting the accompanying violin. Harry watched the whole time, migrating *onto* the piano at some point to give Tom space.

Throughout the afternoon he went to get snacks, popping pieces of Aero mint chocolate into Tom’s mouth whenever he asked for some. He rolled joints for them that he and Tom smoked while he played, or whenever they took a break to write out some of the notes onto their paper.

Harry, having heard the melody so many times, started humming while they played, trying to think up lyrics through the haze of the high he was in.

“It’s not a song that’s meant to have lyrics, you know?” Tom said, smiling up at him as he took a break to smoke the joint they were passing back and forth. Harry was still humming, the melody stuck in his head.

“I’m a lyricist, I can’t help it,” Harry said from where he was leant back on his elbows, sprawled out on the piano. “You’re the musician.”

“A match made in heaven,” Gaspar commented, smiling at them as he accepted the joint from Tom.

Tom hummed, looking back up at Harry. “What have you come up with then?”

“Nothing of substance,” he said honestly. “Lyrics don’t really fit the melody.”

“They’re not supposed to,” Tom said, smiling up at him. “*And* you’re eating all my chocolate that you swore up and down was disgusting, desist.”

Harry laughed, snapping a square of chocolate off and holding it in front of him until he opened his mouth to take it. “I’ll go buy you some more tomorrow morning, if you want. And the texture’s nice—I like the bubbles. The mint’s nasty though.”

“I think you’re just high,” Tom said, a hint of fondness in his voice as he sucked on the square of chocolate, “because you keep eating it despite it being *nasty*.”

“I’ll go buy you some more tomorrow, promise,” Harry said, leaning closer to Tom from his perch.

“I’ll come with you,” Tom said, taking the joint back from Gaspar who was just watching them. He squashed the end into the ashtray and stood up, holding a hand out to Harry. “Come on,” he said, grinning, “we’ve got to try the song out, make sure it’s waltzable.”

Harry laughed, startled. “You just made that word up.”

“Who cares?” Tom said, hand still held between them. “Come on.”

Harry took it, his fingers moving over Tom’s skin like they were meant to be there. “Who’s going to play the piano if you’re too busy spinning me about?”

Tom smiled at him, helping him down from the piano with an arm around his waist. “Gaspar, can you play? And Alphard can play the violin. The piece is written out in its entirety.”

“Yep, I can,” Gaspar said happily, taking the stool Tom had vacated. “Alphie! Come play the violin.”

“Yeah, I heard Tom,” Alphard said as he appeared, picking up his violin.

Gaspar showed him the sheet music, explaining bits to him, while Tom pulled Harry into the main part of the library where the others were.

They were giggling when they got there, and Tom clicked his fingers at everyone. “Come on,” he said, “move the table out of the way.”

“Are you actually going to dance?” Theo asked, surprised.

“Yes,” Tom said simply, grabbing two chairs and setting them against a far bookshelf. Harry followed his lead, stacking the chairs up.

The others did the same, until all chairs were stacked on the side and the table was pushed up against a wall, leaving a large open space.

“We’re ready,” Gaspar said from next to the piano, peeking around the bookshelf to look at them properly.

Tom turned back towards Harry, smiling at him as he held his hand out again.

Harry rolled his eyes but took it, his heart fluttering in his chest.

“We have to bow,” Tom said as Gaspar started playing.

“You’re such a dork,” Harry said through his smile, but he complied, bending his knees and bowing his head.

“Follow my lead,” Tom murmured as he pulled him in, a hand on his waist while he held the other one out.

“You know I will,” Harry said quietly as he settled a hand on Tom’s shoulder, the words leaving his mouth without his permission.

Tom led him in an effortless waltz, and Harry kind of wanted to marry him. He spun him around, always landing a steady hand on his waist to guide him. When the song came to a close, Tom dipped him low.

His eyes never once left Harry as they danced, as if he was the only thing in the world.

Harry melted under his gaze, wondering idly if his heart would survive this. If it could withhold the force that was Tom Riddle.

“Well?” Gaspar asked as the last notes of piano rang out and Tom was pulling Harry back up. “Is it good?”

“It’s perfect,” Tom said, looking into Harry’s eyes as he held him close. He seemed to shake himself a bit, looking off to the side. “But we should test it again, I think I missed a couple steps.”

He hadn’t. Harry knew he hadn’t. He didn’t say anything.

“Come on,” Theo said, capturing Harry’s attention. He was holding a hand out to Abraxas. “I want to dance too.”

“Fine,” Abraxas conceded with an eye roll. “Who’s leading?”

“I’ll lead you in the best waltz of your life, my dear Abraxas,” Theo said, setting a hand on his waist casually.

“What about me?” Rick said, looking put out.

“You can’t dance for shit,” Abraxas sniped, making Theo laugh.

When the music started, Harry’s whole attention turned back to Tom, getting swept up in the allure of every one of his movements, so effortless, so graceful. He held Harry like he was something delicate, precious, with the utmost care. Harry would almost call his embrace *loving*.

“Come on, Tom,” Theo said from beside them. Harry had to admit, both he and Tom were doing an exceptional job of keeping them out of each other’s feet. “Swap partners.”

“I don’t want to,” Tom said, eyes never leaving Harry.

“Come on,” Theo pressed, “it always happens in a waltz.”

Tom grumbled, before taking Harry’s hand more firmly in his and spinning him out.

He landed against Theo’s chest, and righted himself quickly, shaking off the disorientation. Theo was grinning down at him, holding onto his waist in something that couldn’t be qualified as a polite hold.

“Your hand, Theo,” he chastised when his hand started drifting downwards towards his arse.

“Oops,” Theo said with a cheeky grin.

Harry caught Tom’s eye over Theo’s shoulder and saw him scowl.

“Swap back,” Tom said, spinning Abraxas out before waiting for a reply.

Theo rolled his eyes but did the same to Harry, who landed, quite happily, back into Tom’s awaiting arms.

They finished the dance, Tom holding him so tenderly Harry felt a bit faint. He was reluctant to let go, happy to just hold on to Tom for the rest of his life.

“Look at us,” Theo said, having let go of Abraxas, “we are so gay.”

Tom scoffed, rolling his eyes. He let go of Harry gently, hand squeezing his waist affectionately before leaving him. “Go fuck a girl if you’re feeling too gay. God knows getting laid would make you less insufferable.”

“Oh, feisty tonight, are we, Tommy?” Theo teased.

Tom rolled his eyes again. “You didn’t seem to mind being gay when you were feeling Harry up.”

“Oh, don’t get jealous, darling,” Theo said, smirking at him.

“You’re a dickhead,” Tom sniped back.

Theo snorted. “Good work on the piece anyway, it’s beautiful.”

“Thanks,” Tom said begrudgingly. “What are we eating tonight? I’m getting hungry.”

“Harry please please please make that garlic bread you make,” Theo pleaded as they set the room back in order.

“Oh, please do,” Tom said, turning bright eyes on him.

And honestly, how could Harry say no?

— Scene six —

The first rehearsals they did for the play went well. They stuck to book repetitions throughout the whole of February, focusing more on stage directions and what they wanted to do on that front. The younger years were eagerly helpful, and no one dared slack off in the face of Tom's gruelling authority, which bordered on scary at times.

It was good, to ease into things, because the first time Harry heard Tom call him '*my love*,' and '*my darling*,' he thought he just might pass out. And that was without mentioning the grandiose declarations of love he was made to hear.

But, he persevered through it all, despite the stuttering and blushing, he got through it. It got easier as time went on, to dissociate Tom from Alarik, and himself from Elio. They were just acting, and if Harry yearned for Tom to say those things to him in earnest, it was no one's problem but his own. So he got over it.

He was still dreadfully in love with Tom though. He wasn't getting over *that* anytime soon. But he learned to live with it. He took whatever Tom gave him, had him in the capacity he was allowed. He wondered, constantly—and maybe that was what made it so hard—if Tom might share in his feelings.

There were signs, obvious ones, ones even Harry couldn't miss, but Tom was never overtly obvious, and Harry couldn't take his chances without being *sure*.

They had locked themselves in the coffin that was *friendship*, and had dug their own grave. Since then, the line between what was considered friendly and what was considered romantic had blurred beyond recognition. Harry no longer knew whether sleeping cuddled up with someone was just a friend thing, or an obviously romantic one. He couldn't remember whether resting a hand on a friend's waistline was appropriate or not. He didn't know whether friends sometimes smacked kisses on each other's cheeks or not.

It was all a mess, and it often gave Harry a headache. He tried, a couple times, to set things up. When they were lying in bed, face to face, he pretended to wipe a smudge of chocolate from the corner of Tom's mouth, but, despite the suffocating tension, Tom didn't do anything. If anything, he kind of shot Harry down, pulling him down into his chest so they were no longer face to face.

Harry, above all else, refused to make Tom uncomfortable, in case the feelings weren't mutual. So he didn't press. Tom seemed like someone who, when his sights were set on something, didn't hesitate to take. So Harry waited, waited to see if Tom would make the first move.

He didn't. And Harry didn't push.

Time wore on. They went to see the sixth years' rendition of *Romeo and Juliet* on Valentine's day; all the seventh years went, happy to be the ones *watching* a play, for once. It was good, fun even, and Harry wasn't complaining about getting to spend Valentine's day next to Tom.

If he happened to go to the shops on that particular day and come back with a new bar of Aero mint chocolate specifically for him, no one had to know it had been intentional.

February bled into March, and the art students got back to them with dates for each of their costume fittings.

Harry's was the last one, as they'd had to make quite a bit of jewellery which had taken some time. He'd accompanied Tom to his fitting, which had been both fun and incredibly fulfilling for his eyes. He'd accompanied Abraxas too, where he'd ended up giving advice on asking Viola out on a date for over an hour.

Why Abraxas valued his advice when it was clear as day that Harry's own love life was failing miserably, he had no idea. Abraxas had even hinted at him fancying Tom, and Harry hadn't had the heart to deny it anymore so he'd just shrugged. Abraxas had been kind enough to not mention it again.

When the day of Harry's costume fitting came, he was stepping out of the shower when someone knocked on the front door. It was a faint thing, timid.

"Can someone get that?" he shouted over the bannister as he made his way to his room.

"On it!" Alphard shouted back from the kitchen.

"Someone at the door?" Tom asked when he entered the room.

"Yeah, dunno who though," Harry replied, towelling at his hair with one hand while the other held the towel up around his waist.

"What time do we have to be in the art department again?" Tom asked, still in bed—in *Harry's* bed.

"We still have an hour," Harry said, glancing at the clock on the nightstand. "Close your eyes."

Tom did, happily shoving his head back in the pillow. It never got easier, dropping his towel with Tom in the room. He could take a pair of boxers into the bathroom, but there was still a certain thrill in being naked in the same room as Tom.

"Come on, get out of bed," he said with a laugh when he was dressed. "We might need to go see who's here."

"I really would much rather stay in bed," Tom said, wrapping himself up in the quilt.

"Oh, I know," Harry said, "if it were up to you you'd never get out of bed."

Tom hummed, a lazy smile on his face as he burrowed further into the pillow. "I'm cold, I need warming up before I can get out of bed."

Harry laughed, reaching his fingers out to rake through Tom's messy curls. "If I come back to bed you know we won't be getting up for another half hour."

“Five minutes,” Tom said, opening the quilt up. “You left before I woke up this morning, it’s the least you can do.”

“I needed a shower,” Harry said, rolling his eyes as he climbed in. Tom immediately trapped him in his arms, throwing a leg over his waist for good measure. “You’re not cold,” Harry said with a laugh, wrapping an arm around his waist, shuffling closer, “you’re already warm.”

“Now I am,” Tom mumbled into his hair.

Someone knocked on their door, and, without waiting, pressed the door handle down. In his panic, Harry rolled out of the bed completely.

A dishevelled and tired looking Theo appeared in the doorway, levelling them with such a look, Harry blushed. “This is the third time I’ve walked in on you cuddling, you might as well stay in bed at this point, Harry.”

“We weren’t—”

“Oh, come off it,” Theo snapped, rolling his eyes. “Tom’s in your fucking bed, you’re on the fucking floor. Of course you were cuddling! Honestly, just admit you’re fucking, no one gives a shit.”

“We’re not—”

“Then get to it, God!” Theo exclaimed. “I don’t know who’s more frustrated, me or you! It’s painfully obvious you’re itching to get into each other’s pants—just fuck! Jesus Christ.”

Harry was speechless.

“Have you finished?” Tom said, calm as ever, looking bored.

“I am begging you to have sex with each other,” Theo implored.

Tom rolled his eyes, pushing the cover off himself as he went to get up, Harry scrambling up as well. “What did you want?”

“Just come downstairs,” Theo said, huffing as he turned and left, grumbling to himself as he did so.

“What a twat,” Tom said, frustrated as he raided Harry’s wardrobe. “Can we not have five minutes in this fucking place without a lunatic barging in? Let me tell you,” he turned back towards Harry, “I fucking miss the Christmas holidays.”

Harry laughed, grateful that Tom was taking it lightly. He never acknowledged what Theo said about them, not seriously anyway. “Me too,” he said wistfully.

When Tom had stolen a t-shirt and a jumper from Harry’s wardrobe, pulling on a pair of his own trousers, they set off downstairs.

“You’re being ridiculous!” Gaspar was saying, his voice carrying up to the first floor. “Just leave them the fuck alone, you’d think you’re the one frustrated by the whole thing.”

“I am!” Theo exclaimed. “It’s for them!”

“Oh shut up, Theo,” Alphard said. “This isn’t appropriate anyway, you’re making Lysandra uncomfortable.”

Harry shared a look with Tom as they went downstairs, coming out to the library a second later, where Lysandra was sitting around the table with the other boys, looking awkward.

“Hi, Lysandra,” Harry said happily, though he was a bit confused. “What are you doing here?” he asked as he sat down, Tom taking a seat next to him.

“Hi Harry,” she said faintly, not quite meeting his eye, “and Tom. I—you didn’t say where I could meet you for your costume fitting. So I came here, a bit early I know, I just didn’t want to miss you.”

“That’s fine,” Harry said kindly. “Have you offered her anything? Some coffee or something?” he asked the others.

“Not yet—Theo’s been doing our head in,” Abraxas said, glaring across the table at him.

“Theo go get me some coffee,” Tom said, sending him a foul look.

“Get your own coffee,” Theo grumbled, arms crossed as he slumped low in his seat, obviously sulking.

“Get me some coffee or get the fuck away from me. You’re pissing me off,” Tom snapped.

Theo scraped his chair back as he got up, huffing and puffing. “You can be such a dickhead, you know?” he said before setting off for the kitchen.

“Sorry, Lysandra,” Harry said, smiling at her. “Drama queens, the lot of them. Do you want anything? Coffee, tea—Gaspar has this herbal tea that’s quite nice. We have some biscuits and stuff too.”

She smiled back at him, her eyes still a tad wide. “Erm—whatever you’re having?”

“Coffee then?” Harry asked, just to make sure that was okay with her, and she nodded.

It was a Saturday, which was why Lysandra could actually come to this costume fitting, and the other boys didn’t seem too keen on doing anything in particular.

“Anything planned today?” Harry asked.

Gaspar stretched, humming. “Me and Alphie are gonna try and compose something on the violin to accompany my poem, in Act three.”

“Oh, cool,” Harry said. He was genuinely very impressed with how talented his friends were.

“I’m gonna go for a run,” Rick said, “and then probably go to the gym for a bit. Shame you can’t come, Harry, I’m dying to know if we can get you to lift as much as me.”

Harry laughed. “Next time. What about you, Abraxas?”

Abraxas turned red, shifting in his seat. He cleared his throat. “I’m—er—meeting Viola this afternoon.”

“No way!” Harry said before he could stop himself. “You asked her?”

“She said yes?” Alphard asked with a snort.

“She did,” Abraxas said proudly. “I asked her Thursday night, after rehearsals.”

“Good on you,” Harry said. “Where are you taking her?”

“We’re just going for a drink in the café, you know, the one near the supermarket?”

“Cosy,” Rick said with a grin.

“It’s never a good idea to go out with colleagues,” Tom said, joining in the conversation. “I do hope you won’t let this…romantic involvement affect the play.”

“Tom, get over yourself,” Theo said as he reappeared in the library with a pot of coffee and some mugs. “Only you deny yourself the pleasures of life for something so trivial. You can have more than one thing going on in your life, you know?”

“Theo, will you *calm down*, what is wrong with you today?” Alphard huffed.

“I’m just saying,” Theo said, sitting back down, “don’t drag us down into your miserable existence.”

“Piss off, the only miserable thing here is you,” Tom sniped, pouring himself some coffee. “And please use that brain that must be hidden somewhere in your big head. Remember the seventh year play a few years ago? They’d written it around the two main characters’ love story, except the actors had a messy breakup just before the play. It was terrible, they could barely touch or look at each other.”

Theo rolled his eyes. “God forbid the lead actors in a romantic play fuck each other.”

“Theo, please stop it, we do have company,” Gaspar said, lighting himself a cigarette.

“How do you take your coffee, Lysandra?” Harry asked, grabbing her a mug from the table.

She turned wide eyes on him, a small disbelieving smile playing on her lips. “Two sugars, please, and milk, Harry.”

He smiled at her, preparing her coffee the same way he made his.

“Heathens,” Tom muttered as he took a sip of his coffee.

“Shut up,” Harry said with a laugh. “You pretend you drink your coffee black, but there’s two sugars in there.”

Lysandra giggled across the table, and Tom rolled his eyes.

“I’m just saying—” Theo started.

“Perhaps you should stop expressing your thoughts altogether,” Tom cut in, “they’re frankly uninteresting.”

“I am trying to help you,” Theo pressed.

“Has it crossed your seemingly embarrassingly self-centred mind that I do not *want* your help? Whatever that would entail?”

Theo snorted. “*You’re* calling *me* self-centred. Check yourself, darling.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Harry snapped, huffing. “Will you two stop it, or go and have your spat elsewhere. *You’re* being annoying,” he said, pointing at Theo, “and *you’re* being mean,” he said to Tom. “Just calm down, both of you. It’s literally not that serious, and it’s none of your business, Theo. I love you, mate, but *please* shut the fuck up.”

“Hallelujah!” Gaspar exclaimed, sighing. “Thank you, Harry.”

“Sorry,” Theo mumbled. He glanced at Tom out of the corner of his eye, and added, under his breath, “I bet you’re so jealous he told me he loves me.”

Alphard barked out a laugh. “You’re so ridiculous, Theo. I’m starting to think it’s you who wants to sleep with Harry.”

“I have never said I don’t!” Theo exclaimed.

“I hate him,” Tom mumbled, but he was biting back an amused smile. They all laughed a bit, the tension easing in the library, allowing them to move onto different subjects.

They talked about the play for a while, and Harry asked Lysandra about how her fourth year play was coming along. She asked them a few questions about their play, inquiring about past years as well. She even asked Harry about what he did before coming to the school. He had to avoid Tom’s eyes at all cost, refusing to get caught in his lie.

With ten o’clock approaching, Harry, Tom, and Lysandra got up to set off for the art department.

“Can I come?” Theo asked, getting up as well.

“Absolutely not,” Tom said immediately. “I don’t want to see you. Stay away from me.”

“You’re so mean.”

“You’ve done nothing but piss me off this morning, go away,” Tom replied, and Theo sulked off up to his room.

“They’re best friends,” Harry said to Lysandra who looked a bit concerned. “Don’t worry about it. This happens all the time.”

“I’ll come out with you,” Rick said, stretching his shoulders. “I’m gonna go down by the lake.”

“Okay, come on then,” Harry said, pulling his jumper over his head. It had definitely warmed up as the weather eased into Spring, but it was still chilly out.

They got to the art department easily, a big room full of *stuff*. It was the place dedicated to projects for the theatre so it was full of costumes, material to make costumes, work benches, planks of wood, paint…It always reminded Harry a bit of a warehouse.

It was Luna who greeted them, a tape measure hanging from around her shoulders. She gave them a big smile, blinking her dreamy eyes at them.

“Hi Luna,” Harry said happily.

“Harry, how are you?” she asked, giving him a quick hug.

“I’m okay, and you?”

“Very well,” she grinned. “You’ve brought Tom! And who’s this?”

“This is Lysandra, she has a part in the play and she’s interested in tagging along for stuff we have to do. She’s in her fourth year,” Harry explained. “And Lysandra, this is Luna, a friend.”

“It’s lovely to meet you,” Luna said. “And what a lovely name.”

“Thank you,” Lysandra said timidly. “It’s nice to meet you too.”

“Are you in charge of Harry’s costume, Luna?” Tom asked, seeming pleased with the prospect.

“Yes, and what a lovely design!” she said, turning her back to them as she wandered further into the room.

They followed her up to a workbench near the back. It was flanked by a dressing table and a long mirror. There was a partition near the wall, to give the people changing some privacy.

“Who are you playing, Lysandra?” Luna asked. “I might have your costume ready.”

“Oh, I’m the servant,” Lysandra said, a hint of pride in her voice.

Luna rifled through a rack of dresses that were hung up and came out with a simple one Harry recognised from Tom’s designs. “This one!” she said victoriously.

“Is that mine?” Lysandra asked tentatively.

“Yes, you can try it on behind the partition if you want,” Luna said with a kind smile. “I might need to make some adjustments to it.”

“Okay,” Lysandra said, seeming shy as she took the dress and shuffled over to the partition.

“Now, Harry,” Luna said, turning back to her fabric, “strip down to your boxers. Shoes, socks, everything off!”

“Do I not get the luxury of the partition?” Harry asked, pulling his jumper over his head. He didn’t mind, it wasn’t anything Tom hadn’t seen before, and he’d never been shy.

“Nope,” Luna said, coming out of the rack of clothes with what looked like Harry’s costume.

He finished stripping down under Tom’s watchful eyes while she rifled through boxes on the dressing table.

“Okay,” Luna said eventually, turning back towards them. She handed Harry the white cloth. “I stuck to the design as much as possible, taking inspiration from what the Greeks used to wear in its simplicity. I tried not to make it overly feminine, because that’s not what you’re going for. But, I found it lacking on its own, so see here,” she held the dress with Harry, pointing out some golden embroidery, “I took the liberty of adding some embroidery. I kept it simple, just olive branches.”

Tom joined them in thumbing at the fabric, holding it out in front of himself to see better. “It looks great, Luna. Here, Harry, put it on.”

“I’ve never actually worn a dress,” Harry said, “I dunno how to put it on.”

“Arms up,” Luna instructed, bunching up the fabric in her hands.

Harry obeyed, laughing when Luna put it on for him. It fell down to his ankles, and there were no sleeves, just thick straps of the same fabric hanging onto his shoulders. The material was flowy and thin, hanging off him nicely.

“Here, Tom, you make it fit on Harry properly, I’ll check on Lysandra.”

“‘Course,” Tom said easily, stepping up to him. His eyes were intent on Harry’s body, and he tried not to squirm under the scrutiny. “Let’s see,” he mumbled, reaching out to tug the fabric this way and that. “Here, stand in front of the mirror,” he murmured, moving Harry over to the mirror and standing behind him as he adjusted the fabric.

The dress left his collar bones exposed, but only in the slightest, a tease. It made him look smaller, and a bit thinner than he actually was as well, which Harry wasn’t sure he liked that much.

Tom thumbed at the embroidery lining the collar and the waistline. There was another branch that went up his spine, and Tom ran his finger up it.

“It looks great,” he said, looking at Harry through the mirror.

“Are you happy with the design?” Harry asked, leaning back into him, allowing himself to prod at the fabric a bit. It was strange, his legs being covered without the constriction of trousers. It was quite nice.

“Very,” Tom replied, grinning. “I can’t wait to see what it’ll look like with all the jewellery.”

“Here, Tom,” Luna said, coming back from behind the partition, “what do you think of Lysandra's dress?”

They both turned around. Lysandra’s dress was a soft brown, a white apron laying across her lap, tied around her waist. The neckline was high up, covering her almost completely, while the bottom of the dress dropped all the way down to her ankles.

“Looks good,” Tom said, tilting his head to the side. “A bit big maybe?”

Luna hummed. “I didn’t make this one, Dean did. But I think we might have mixed Lysandra’s measurements up. She’s a lot smaller than anticipated.”

“It’s not an issue, I hope?” Tom said, stepping towards them.

“No, no,” Luna assured, smiling up at him softly. “I’ll pin the dress and sew it again. It’s no problem.”

“What do you think, Lysandra? Do you like it?” Tom asked.

“Yes!” she said brightly.

Tom hummed. “That’s good. What should we do with your hair? Can I?”

“Oh—yes,” Lysandra said, looking surprised as Tom reached out to touch her hair.

Harry watched, bemused, as Tom held her hair back against her nape and leant back to look at her face, before dividing the hair into two parts and doing the same.

“I’d say, two plaits, what do you think, Luna?” he said, tilting his head to the side.

“I agree,” Luna said, taking one half of the hair and passing her fingers through it. “With ribbons at the end.”

Tom hummed, amused. He seemed to be plaiting her hair very quickly, and very efficiently. Harry watched, shocked.

“Where the fuck did you learn to plait hair?” he said.

“What?” Tom said, looking over at him. “Oh, at the orphanage. As we got older we had to look after the younger ones a lot. I found plaiting girls' hair, as opposed to just tying it up, kept it from getting tangled for longer.”

“Fascinating,” Harry mumbled, finding this piece of information highly endearing.

“You’ve got such pretty hair,” Luna said to Lysandra as she plaited the other side. It was true, it was very long, and very black, sleek.

“Thank you,” she said, blushing. “Yours is too, it’s so pretty.”

“Oh, how lovely, thank you,” Luna said, smiling at her. Her hair was currently pinned up with what looked like a paint brush, some wild curls of platinum blonde tumbling down her shoulders. It really was pretty, Luna was very pretty.

“There we go,” Tom said, pinching the end of the plait. “Looks good, I think we’ll go with that.”

“I agree,” Luna said, teasing some of the baby hairs on Lysandra’s forehead. “I’ll pin the dress then, Tom, you can see what jewellery you want on Harry. It’s all on the dressing table.”

“Brilliant,” Tom said, setting Lysandra’s hair on her shoulder before going over to the dressing table.

Harry watched, an amused smile on his face, as Luna poked and prodded at Lysandra’s dress, pinning it so it fit better.

“Rings first,” Tom said as he came back over to Harry, his hands full of golden bands.

Twenty minutes later, Harry was decked out with rings on every finger, and bracelets covering his wrists. They were all dainty things, all golden. Tom didn’t seem taken with any of the bulkier designs, keeping them slim.

“Right, let’s see,” Luna said as she came over, Lysandra having gone back around to the partition to get changed. “Oh yes, the ankle bracelets and locket were made special, they’re in a different box, silly me.”

Tom and Harry shared an amused sort of look as she went to find the box, coming back a couple seconds later.

The locket, unlike the rest of the jewellery so far, was thicker. The golden colour edged on green, making it look old. The locket itself was a large pendant, and the chain was much thicker than the bracelets Harry was wearing. It stood out, but by the look in Tom’s eyes, that was the intended effect.

He wasted no time in setting the necklace around Harry’s neck, laying the pendant out on his chest, against his sternum.

“Good?” Harry asked, finding Tom’s concentrated frown exceedingly endearing. He was more invested in Harry’s costume than his own.

“Looks good, yeah,” Tom mumbled, straightening out to look at him better.

The ankle bracelets were next. Harry had been expecting something quite bulky and uncomfortable to wear, but they weren't. They were simple golden chains with charms attached. When the chains were shook, the charms clinked together to make noise.

"They're perfect," Tom said as he held one up, inspecting it.

"I'm glad you think so," Luna said. "I wasn't too sure what kind of charms you'd want, so I just put flowers. I think they're pretty."

"They are," Harry confirmed.

"Here, hold your foot out," Tom said as he crouched down.

Harry had to look away, swallowing nervously as he held his foot out to Tom who looked *very* nice from this angle. Especially when he looked up at him from under his lashes.

"Could you hem the dress a bit, Luna?" Tom asked as he stood back up, having successfully attached both bracelets to Harry's ankles.

She hummed, crouching down in front of Harry in turn and taking out some pins. "It is a bit long," she conceded.

"That's better," Tom said when she'd finished, smiling as he looked Harry over. "Is that everything then? The arms seem a bit empty with there being no sleeves, don't you think?"

"Yes, but I have something for that," Luna said happily, going over to the dressing table.

Harry looked over at Lysandra, feeling a bit bewildered by the whole situation. Tom had stopped asking for his opinion after he'd failed to give '*the correct one*' about the rings. Lysandra smiled at him, biting back a laugh.

Luna came back holding up two golden bands, and Tom's eyes lit up.

"Luna, you're a genius," he said, reaching out to hold the jewellery that Harry wasn't entirely sure of what it was.

"Where—" Harry cut himself off, clearing his throat— "where will that go?"

"Around your biceps, Harry," Luna said kindly. "Show me your arms."

He let her measure his biceps, flexing when he was told to.

"They should be okay," she said eventually. "If they hurt or pinch at any time, just let me know."

Harry nodded, watching as she clasped the bands around his biceps. They were tight, and he couldn't flex his arms properly when they were on. They didn't hurt though, in fact, they looked quite cool.

“They look great,” Tom said, thumbing at the place where the band dug into Harry’s skin. “I think the only thing missing now is something to cinch your waist.”

“Would you rather it be fabric or some chain?” Luna asked, holding up a length of golden chain.

“Chain, of course,” Tom answered. He wasn’t even pretending to let Harry decide anything anymore, it was quite funny how excited he was.

“Isn’t this a bit over the top?” Harry asked, cringing away from Tom’s disbelieving look.

“Harry, you look gorgeous,” he said, with all the confidence in the world. “It’s not too much, it’s intentional. The jewellery is more part of your costume than the fucking dress.”

Lysandra laughed from her perch on a chest near the partition, probably at how red Harry’s face had gone in no more than a second.

“You do look very pretty like this, Harry,” Luna said dreamily, wrapping the golden chain around his waist, “you should wear jewellery more often.”

“Er—thanks,” he said awkwardly.

“Take the dress off, actually, Harry,” Luna said, huffing at the chain. “I need your proper waist measurement without the fabric in the way.

“Here,” Tom said, taking the locket off him.

Harry was fairly certain it was the jewellery—the fact that he was wearing something *different*—but he was feeling awfully shy as he tugged the dress off himself, leaving him in nothing but his boxers and the various pieces of metal wrapped around him.

Tom took the clothing from him and folded it over his forearm as Luna wrapped the chain around his waist again.

“That’s better,” she said, crouching down to fit it correctly. “I’ll leave a bit dangling off, okay?” She cut the excess chain with some special wire cutters.

It was a thin sort of golden chain, and it rested around Harry’s waist perfectly.

“That actually looks really good on you, Harry,” Luna commented. “You should consider wearing it often. Look in the mirror.”

Harry did, glancing over at himself in the mirror and stopping short, his breath catching. “Oh,” he murmured, taking a step closer. He averted his eyes from the mirror, feeling embarrassed. He *did* look good, and it did suit him. “Yeah—” he cleared his throat— “looks great.” He thumbed idly at the chain around his waist as he looked back at them.

“It suits you,” Tom commented, eyeing the place where Harry was still thumbing at the chain.

“You should keep it,” Luna said happily, picking up the loose end of the chain hanging on Harry’s hip. “We can always give you more if you happen to break it, but you can keep it. You should wear it.”

“Really?” Harry asked, looking down at the chain. He supposed he could get used to it, it did look good, after all.

Luna hummed, unclasping the chain from his waist. “But do try it on over the dress first.”

“‘Course,” he said, grinning.

He put the dress back on, fastening the chain around his waist once Luna had set the dress back in place properly.

“Perfect,” Tom said, looking delighted.

“Harry is playing a Prince, isn’t he?” Luna asked, a smile playing on her lips.

“Yeah,” Harry replied.

“I have something that should tie the whole look together,” Luna explained. “It didn’t feature in the original sketch, but I think you’ll like it, Tom.”

She left around a corner, disappearing into the clutter.

“What’s that about?” Harry asked, looking up at Tom with a laugh.

He shrugged, reaching out to fuss over the locket placement on Harry’s chest. “I’ve been working with Luna for years, and I’ve just learnt to let her do her thing. She’s absolutely brilliant at what she does.”

“The highest of compliments, that, from you,” Harry said, grinning up at him.

Tom hummed, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. “Some people deserve it,” he murmured.

“Here it is!” Luna exclaimed, interrupting whatever was going on. “I found it a couple weeks ago digging through a chest to look for accessories for your costumes, and I thought it would be perfect for Harry’s.”

She emerged from the clutter, holding a crown, and Tom almost gasped.

“Oh Luna,” he said, reaching out to take it, “you’re brilliant.”

She laughed, grinning up at him. “Here you go, try it.”

It was a small crown, not extravagant. Simple, a Prince’s crown. It was golden, the pattern of the symbols nondescript, looking more like flowers than any kind of royal symbolism.

“Harry darling, come in front of the mirror,” Tom said, grabbing Harry’s arm. And the whole room seemed to hold its breath, everyone coming to a halt.

Lysandra made a small noise from over on her perch, and Harry saw her hand go over her mouth. Tom froze where he was dragging Harry over to the mirror, his eyes wide, his cheeks dusting in pink. Harry, for his part, couldn’t breathe. His fingers felt weirdly tingly, and his stomach was churning up a storm, his heart somewhere in his throat.

“I mean—” Tom said quickly, clearing his throat— “I meant to say, just Harry—it’s er—it’s the habit of calling you darling onstage, I’m sure.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, sounding breathless, “s’fine.” It was anything but *fine*, actually, but he was trying very hard to be casual about it.

“*Harry darling*,” Luna said, looking off into space. “That sounds nice, it really rolls off the tongue, doesn’t it? *Harry darling*, I might start calling you that.”

Harry stared at her, stunned for a second, before he laughed, nodding. “Yeah, that’s—‘course, Luna.”

Tom cleared his throat again, covering a small laugh. “Come in front of the mirror, then,” he said, looking back down at Harry, his cheeks glowing red. “Let me crown you.”

“Go on then,” Harry said, his pulse still beating erratically in his wrists and neck.

Tom made him stand facing the mirror as he stood at his back, depositing the crown onto his head. He spent a couple seconds making Harry’s hair look nicer, curling out from under the crown, framing his face.

“There,” he said once he’d finished, and Harry was left staring at himself in this strange attire, looking oddly *good*. “You look gorgeous,” Tom said, smiling at him through the mirror. His words were so earnest, and Harry blushed, fidgeting as he avoided his own eye in the mirror.

“It looks really good on you, Harry,” Lysandra said, giving him a thumbs up.

“Thanks,” he said, smiling at her through the mirror. “And thank you,” he added, looking at Tom, “you did a great job on design.”

Tom looked elated for a moment before he sniffed haughtily, patting down Harry’s shoulder. “Of course I did,” he said, making Harry laugh.

“Okay, I’ll make the last modifications on the costumes,” Luna said, stashing a pencil behind her ear. “They should all be ready for next week—not this Monday, the one after—so you can start costume rehearsals then, if you want. And Harry, keep the waist chain, just come to me if you need a new one.”

“Great, thanks a lot Luna,” Harry said, already taking the rings off.

“Yes, as always, you did a great job, Luna,” Tom said kindly, helping Harry out of the copious amounts of jewellery.

“Oh, you’re too kind, Tom,” she said, “it’s always a pleasure to work with you.” She rifled through the dressing table, coming out with a shoebox. “Keep this for all of Harry’s jewellery, keep it all in the same place.”

“Do you not want to keep it here?” Harry asked.

“We can do for the time being, but it’ll be easier to keep everything in the dressing rooms by the theatre once you start proper repetitions,” Luna said, dusting off the box of some residual makeup.

“Here,” Tom said, unhooking Harry’s waist chain, “take the dress off.” He turned to Luna while Harry did as he was told, and said, “We’ll do that then, get all the costumes and accessories once everything is done so that they stay in the same place.”

Harry finished taking the dress off, handing it over to Luna who hooked it back onto a hanger. Tom fastened the chain back around his waist, and Harry ignored how his breathing went a bit shallow.

He finished taking everything off and getting dressed in his usual clothes again, revelling in a little thrill when he felt the waist chain moving under his t-shirt.

“I have to see Theo for a refitting of his trousers, I’ll help him take everything to the theatre then,” Luna said once they were ready to go. “Come and see me or Dean if there’s anything wrong with any of the costumes and we’ll fit it properly for you.”

“Cheers Luna,” Harry said, smiling brightly at her. “I’ll see you later, yeah?”

“Of course, Harry, we’ll catch up like we always do,” she replied dreamily, waving at them.

“Bye Luna,” Tom said, giving her a small wave. “Thanks again.”

“Bye!” Lysandra called as they left the warehouse. “I’d best go to my dorm. Thanks for letting me come along, it was a lot of fun!”

“No problem, Lysandra,” Harry said, smiling at her. “We’ll see you Monday then?”

“Yep,” she said brightly, “bye bye.”

“Bye,” Tom said, waving her off. They walked together through the halls of the castle in silence for a while before Tom turned to him, and said, “What do you want to do today then, Potter?”

“Potter?” Harry echoed, laughing up at him. Tom had a teasing smile on his face. “I dunno, we could help Alphie and Gaspar? Or we could do fuck all in bed all day? Or I heard they’re showing *Dirty Dancing* at the cinema in the village. We could go watch that, with Theo maybe if he’s up for it. I dunno, what do you fancy, *Riddle*?”

Tom smiled at him, amused. “As much as I’d love to stay in bed all day, I’m up now. So we might as well go to the cinema, if you want. I need some cigarettes anyway.”

“Cinema it is,” Harry said happily. He hadn’t been to the cinema in *ages*, and he was dying to go. “We’ll ask Theo, yeah?”

Tom rolled his eyes. “If we have to.”

“You know he’ll sulk if we watch *Dirty Dancing* without him.” His hand brushed Tom’s as they walked across the school grounds, and Harry, feeling bold, linked their little fingers together for a couple seconds before letting go, hoping the gesture was *casual* and *friendly*.

Tom hummed, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth. “I suppose you’re right,” he murmured, his voice small.

— Scene seven —

In early April, they decided to take a weekend off. They'd been rehearsing, or helping the art students with the set, or looking after their costumes, or going over stage directions, or managing anything and everything to do with the play every single day for months by that point.

Something of a relief was Snape's '*ego reconstruction*' lessons coming to an end. They'd recently gotten through everyone, ending with Tom. Harry had made sure to find lovely things to say about all his friends before every lesson. It was horrendously awkward, but everyone always left the classroom with a smile on their face. When Tom's turn had come, Harry had prepared exactly what he wanted to say; he'd kept it simple but personal, trying not to fall into declarations of undying love. It was harder than one would think, what with the words *I'm in love with you* constantly on the tip of his tongue.

Everything was coming along fine; Harry and Tom had their dance sequence entirely choreographed, they just needed to get better at it, and everyone was learning their lines. The set was coming along nicely, though they'd had to make a few modifications. Everything was fine, but God was it a lot of work, and they were all starting to feel the stress of the situation.

Which was why Tom proposed they take a weekend off.

"It's weird," Alphard said when they were all drinking their morning coffee on Saturday, "I don't know what to do, I feel like I'm slacking off."

Rick hummed. "Even in bed this morning I was going over everything that needed to be done."

Tom tapped the table with his fingers. Harry watched the motion in a daze, feeling tired despite having woken up not long before. They'd lounged about in bed for a while, Tom's fingers playing lazily with the chain still wrapped around Harry's waist. Tom always ended up fiddling with it in some way when they were lounging about together.

"Yeah," Theo said, rubbing his hands over his face. "I knew it would be a lot of work but my God, I haven't stopped thinking about the play since the beginning of the term."

Gaspar groaned, pressing his forehead to the table's surface. "Even now we're talking about the play."

Tom tapped the table again, clearing his throat. "I thought we might actually need to do something to stop thinking about it, so I managed to reserve the music room for us up in the castle. We've got access to it all day."

Harry looked up at him sharply. "Are you serious?"

"You're kidding!" Gaspar exclaimed, sitting up straight. "You managed to get it on a Saturday? Oh my god!"

“Yes, I thought it would be fun,” Tom said, turning to Harry. “*And* you promised me a demonstration on the electric guitar.”

Harry laughed, a sense of excitement making him feel a bit livelier. “I did.”

“Oh, this is brilliant!” Alphard said happily.

Gaspar jumped up. “I’ll get all my sheet music and stuff—what genre are we doing?”

“Apparently, rock,” Tom said, as if he’d never pronounced the word aloud before.

Harry laughed, shaking his head. “Just a demonstration, we can do whatever you want. You’re the music experts.”

“We are doing rock!” Gaspar said excitedly, before running off up to his room.

“Well, if we’re doing rock,” Theo said, getting up and rounding the table, “we might as well act like rockstars.” He picked up the bottle of whiskey on a side table and looked at them all expectantly, smirking.

“Theo, it’s ten in the morning,” Abraxas said with an incredulous laugh.

“Would a rockstar worry himself with the time of day, Abraxas?” Theo asked, grabbing glasses.

“You’re an alcoholic,” Alphard teased, accepting the glass being handed to him.

“Harry dearest,” Theo said, ignoring Alphard, “be a darling and roll a joint.”

Harry laughed, shaking his head as he looked in Tom’s direction. “Look what happens when you offer activity fuelled time off.”

Tom hummed, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “It’ll be a fun day, I’m sure.”

“How many drinks for you to sing?” Harry teased, sticking two sheets of rolling paper together.

“I’m not singing,” Tom said matter-of-factly, crossing his arms. “You, however, well…” he shrugged, trailing off.

Harry laughed, licking across a cigarette to get the tobacco out, uncaring of how his eyes locked with Tom’s as he lifted his eyebrows suggestively.

*

By the time they actually got to the music room, they were all drunk, or well on their way to being so. They’d brought a bottle of whiskey with them anyway, so no one was getting any more sober.

The room itself was much larger than Harry had been expecting. It was full of light, long windows running the length of it. At the far end there was a mini stage, a microphone set up in the centre, drums to the right, and other instruments strewn around. A piano sat to the right side of the stage, and various pieces of equipment lined the walls.

The majority of the room, though, was empty. A large open space that they could do whatever they wanted with.

“People sometimes hold mini concerts in here,” Gaspar explained when Harry asked about the open space. He’d brought along his huge binder full of sheet music, his electric guitar, and his acoustic one, for good measure. He’d also insisted Alphard bring his violin, ‘*just in case*.’

“Before we start the band,” Theo said, pushing his designer sunglasses down to the end of his nose as he eyed Harry—he was taking the rockstar thing very seriously, “we need to know how good you are.”

Harry laughed. “What? You want me to show you what I can do?”

“Exactly!” Theo exclaimed.

Harry nodded. “Okay, let me set everything up then.”

Tom sat at the piano, while the others all sat on the floor. Rick filled up all their glasses, and Gaspar helped Harry set the guitar up on the stage.

Harry laughed once everything was ready, looking at them all sitting eagerly on the floor. He fiddled with the pick between his fingers for a second, adjusting the guitar hanging from his shoulders. Gaspar’s guitar was a beauty, and when he’d plucked the strings to test it out, it sounded amazing. The school’s amplifiers were actually some of the best on the market, and Harry was sure the whole school would hear.

“Alright,” he said, clearing his throat, “I actually haven’t played in ages.”

“Start with something simple,” Gaspar said, looking up at him excitedly. “Get back into the feel of it.”

Harry hummed. “Something simple, hm? What about this?”

An electric guitar in his hands had the nasty tendency of making Harry more cocky than he needed to be, which prompted him into not warming up at all, and throwing himself head first into the complicated sequence of *Thunderstruck* by AC/DC, just to show off. Thankfully, he’d always been awfully gifted on the guitar.

“Oh my God!” Gaspar exclaimed, jumping to his feet, his eyes bright.

Harry laughed, letting the guitar ring out into the room after only a few seconds. “Or this?”

He did the first notes of *Highway to Hell* by AC/DC, then a few seconds of *Should I Stay or Should I Go* by The Clash, then *I Love Rock ‘N Roll* by Joan Jett.

He was showing off.

“How’s that?” he asked, grinning at them stupidly.

“You’re in the band!” Theo exclaimed rowdily, knocking back his glass of whiskey.

“Oh, we are *so* doing this,” Gaspar said, busying himself with setting up other instruments.

“The rockstar fantasy lives on!” Theo declared.

Harry laughed, looking over at Tom. “Well,” he said, “impressed?”

Tom’s lips moved wordlessly for a second, and he blinked, looking at Harry. He cleared his throat, smoothing down his trousers by running his hands along his thighs. “I have yet to see anything. You only played for twenty seconds, at most.”

Harry laughed, seeing straight through him.

“Harry, you’re singing, right?” Gaspar said.

“What?” Harry said, whipping around. “I can’t sing.”

Theo scoffed. “We know you can, wanker!”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I can’t sing this genre.”

“Oh piss off, Harry, ‘course you can,” Rick said, brandishing his glass.

“Fuck’s sake,” Harry grumbled, rolling his eyes at Tom’s amused look.

“I need someone to play the drums, and someone to do rhythm guitar,” Gaspar mumbled through the pick in his mouth. “I’m playing bass.”

“Only Rick knows how to play the drums,” Theo said, “aside from you, of course. And no one else can play the guitar.”

“You’re all useless,” Gaspar said. “Rick get on drums. Harry, you'll have to do your best with only one guitar, I’ll do my best on the bass.”

“Okay, but what are we playing?” Harry asked, laughing as Gaspar fussed over the microphone.

“Warm up with *I Love Rock ‘N Roll*, then you can pick whatever you want,” Gaspar said, grinning at him.

“Okay,” Harry said. He coughed, trying to clear his throat.

“One, two,” Gaspar said into the microphone, testing it out. “Sounds good. Ready when you are.”

Theo whistled loudly, and Alphard clapped.

“Okay, Rick, whenever you’re ready, mate,” Harry said into the microphone.

The words were barely out of his mouth that Rick started playing, and Harry had to hurry to follow. Theo and Alphard were as much a part of the ‘band’ as anyone, clapping along to the rhythm and doing backing vocals from the floor.

As embarrassing as it was, it was a lot of fun. And Harry nailed the guitar solo.

“Woo!” Theo shouted when they were done, whistling with his fingers. “Harry! Marry me!” he shouted in a high-pitched voice.

“Piss off,” Harry replied, laughing. He looked over to Tom again, secretly hoping he’d be impressed. “Well?”

Tom raised his eyebrows expectantly. “That was just the warm up,” he said.

Harry laughed, shaking his head. “You’re impossible to please.” Tom nodded, biting back a smile. “Want to be impressed?”

“I ask for nothing more,” Tom said, levelling him with a look.

“Okay,” Harry said, nodding. “I’ll play you my favourite song on the guitar, how about that?”

“I’m sure I’ll love it,” Tom said, rolling his eyes. He was feigning boredom so hard, but Harry knew he was having fun.

“Oh,” Gaspar said, sounding interested. “What are we playing?”

“*No more tears*,” Harry said, fiddling with the guitar, “Ozzy Osbourne.”

“You can play it?” Gaspar asked, eyes wide.

Harry hummed. “It’s my favourite.”

“Okay okay, what do we need?” Gaspar asked, walking around the stage.

“Er—guitar, drums, bass, keyboard,” Harry cited, turning a dial on the amps.

“I don’t think I know this one,” Alphard said from the floor.

“I’ll have to do bass and keyboard,” Gaspar said, scruffing up his hair, “I’m sure I’ll manage. I’ve got the directions for the keyboard in here somewhere.” He rifled through his binder and came out with a sheet of paper.

In the meantime, Harry finished his glass of whiskey.

“Ready, Harry?” Gaspar asked.

Harry jumped back onto the stage and settled the guitar against himself properly. “Ready,” he said.

Gaspar started playing the bass from beside the keyboard, somehow managing to introduce that instrument when it was needed. Harry came in when he had to, a grin spreading across his face. He loved the guitar, and he loved this song.

The light in the window is a crack in the sky.

He glanced at Tom from time to time as they played, trying not to get distracted when he caught his focused intent on him, his lips parted.

"Take it away, Gaspar," Harry said when it was the keyboard solo. He was having so much fun, so caught up in the atmosphere. Theo, Alphard, and Abraxas were a brilliant audience, cheering and whistling.

He looked back at Tom when it was time for the guitar solo. He mouthed the word, "Ready?" to him, and, in a boldness that only came when he was playing the guitar, *winked* at him.

Just for the drama, he dropped down onto his knees with it, and Theo screamed.

Maybe a kiss before I leave you this way.

Tom's eyes were wide, and he was sitting on the edge of the piano stool.

Harry closed the song, and laughed when the boys on the floor gave them a standing ovation. "Thank you, thank you," he said, bowing like an idiot. "Impressed yet?" he asked Tom.

Tom shifted in his seat, and *laughed*. "I am," he conceded, looking up at Harry with something that made him feel giddy.

The door opened quite suddenly, and they all turned to look at who it was. Viola appeared in the doorway with a few other sixth years.

"I thought it was you!" she exclaimed, eyes landing on Abraxas.

"Viola!" Abraxas said, stumbling in his haste to turn around properly. His cheeks were painted pink and he was visibly quite drunk.

"Hi," she said, laughing, "do you mind if we stay?"

"Of course not," Abraxas said quickly.

Harry shared a look with the other boys and they all laughed quietly, except Theo who snorted, quite loudly.

"Miss Carrow," he said, bowing, "you look in good health."

Viola laughed, bending her knees in greeting. "As do you, Mr. Nott. I am glad to see you well."

Theo grinned, beckoning everyone in. "We're just messing about. Turns out Harry's a natural born rockstar."

“We heard,” Margaux said, nodding in Harry’s direction. “You’re really good.”

“Cheers,” Harry said, lifting his glass to her.

“Didn’t know you played the drums, Rick,” Margaux said, sitting down on the floor.

“I am a man of many talents,” Rick replied, giving her a sly smile.

Margaux laughed, rolling her eyes. “I’m sure.”

Just as Theo went to shut the door behind the girls, a few more people appeared.

“Hi!” one of the girls that had just appeared said. “We heard you playing, mind if we join?”

“We’re music students,” another girl said.

“Sure!” Theo said, throwing his hands up. “Welcome all. Oh, Lysandra is that you? Come in!”

Lysandra appeared in the doorway after the music students, smiling over at Harry and waving.

Harry grinned, waving back at her.

“Luna!” Theo shouted over the chatter in the room. “Come in, my love! Actually, you know what, I’ll leave the door open.”

“Hello,” Luna said, appearing through the door. “Are we being rockstars today?”

“Yes we are, my darling,” Theo said, grinning at her.

Harry rolled his eyes at the display. In a matter of moments, the room was quite full.

“Hi, I’m Roxanne,” one of the music students said, getting up onto the stage.

“Harry,” he replied with a smile.

“What are we playing? We can fill in the missing instruments,” Roxanne said, hands in her jean pockets.

“I dunno,” Harry replied, shrugging. He stepped up to the microphone again. “Anyone have any requests?”

“Do *Should I Stay or Should I Go!”* Alphard called.

“Fine by me,” Gaspar said. “Who’s playing what?”

They sorted the music students out with instruments. Rick handed over the drums to someone else, probably to go and flirt with Margaux, Harry thought.

Harry took his jumper off while he waited for everyone to get sorted out, handing it over to Tom. Theo whistled when his t-shirt rode up.

“I’m sure if you threw it out into the crowd you’d make someone happy,” Tom said with a smirk, eyes raking over his chest.

Harry smiled. “Rather it be in safe hands.”

“Should I ask you to sign it?” Tom asked, grinning up at him.

Harry laughed, flicking his arm. “Shut up.”

Tom smiled. “Here,” he said, holding up a joint Harry had failed to notice between his fingers.

He grinned, leaning down to take a drag, blowing the smoke over Tom’s head.

“Harry! We’re ready,” Gaspar said, beckoning him over.

“Thanks,” he said to Tom, before going back to the microphone, standing next to Roxanne who was playing the guitar as well.

Darling you got to let me know, should I stay or should I go?

Harry’s eyes kept drifting over to Tom, against his will. And each time, he found Tom’s eyes on him.

It’s always tease, tease, tease
You’re happy when I’m on my knees

Tom blushed when Harry said it, he was sure of it.

The people gathered in the room cheered once the song was finished, after having sung along for the most part. Harry laughed, shaking his head at the utter ridiculousness of the scene.

“Harry!” Theo shouted, making his way up to the stage with a cigarette in one hand and his glass of whiskey in the other. “Tell me you know *Pour some sugar on me*, we’re doing it together.”

Harry snorted. “‘Course I know it, get up here.”

Theo made a gleeful sound, and stumbled over to Harry’s side.

“Theo you can’t sing for shit!” Alphard shouted over the noise in the room.

“Oh, piss off,” Theo sniped into the microphone.

“Def Leppard, yeah?” Gaspar said from beside them, grinning. He looked like he was having the most fun out of all of them.

“Yep,” Harry said. It was another of his favourite songs to play on the guitar.

“Ready rockstars?” Theo said into the microphone, really taking his role to heart.

Harry took a drink from the glass in his hand before handing it back to him while the people gathered cheered.

“Let’s go!” Theo said.

When they got to the chorus, Harry couldn’t help the bark of laughter that escaped him as Theo shouted, “*Pour some sugar on me*,” into the microphone, almost missing his answering, “*Ooh in the name of love*.”

Theo grinned at him, leaning closer as he said, “*Pour your sugar on me*.”

Harry laughed again, leaning in to get to the microphone. They were indecently close, but he supposed the song warranted it.

Theo’s hand gesture accompanying Harry’s, *“You gotta squeeze a little, squeeze a little, tease a little more*,” got them a lot of cheering from the people gathered.

During the guitar solo, Theo poured the glass of whiskey all over his head. Harry laughed, managing to keep up, and threw his head back, catching the stream of whiskey on his tongue. Theo seemed delighted, and it elicited a lot of whistling. The meaning was clear—and *filthy* —and when Harry looked Tom’s way, his lips were parted, and his cheeks red as he stared at them.

Theo ended up pressing up against Harry’s back for the end of the song, allowing him to play the guitar properly, leaning into the microphone to sing. It was the most fun Harry had ever had playing a song.

“Thank you, thank you!” Theo shouted when they’d finished, his voice cracking. Harry laughed, pushing his soaking hair back

“Mr. Nott!”

It was Professor McGonagall. In fact, Harry had failed to notice, but there were multiple Professors standing in the room, watching them, including McGonagall, Dumbledore, and Snape. Other Professors that Harry vaguely recognised were standing with them, looking amused.

“Oh no,” Theo mumbled, trying to hide the cigarette behind his back. “Professor! What a surprise!”

McGonagall levelled him with a stern look, before she smiled, looking amused. “You are not allowed to smoke in here.”

“Very sorry,” Theo said sheepishly. “Just got a bit caught up in the whole rockstar thing.”

“I’m sure,” McGonagall said, “do carry on though.”

“Really?” Gaspar asked, looking relieved.

“Jolly good show boys!” Dumbledore said, grinning.

There was a sort of stunned silence, before everyone started talking again, the Professors hovering at the back of the room, looking at them expectantly.

“I want to sing!” Alphard exclaimed, stumbling up onto the stage.

Harry laughed incredulously, nodding. He still had whiskey dripping down his face. “D’you know this, Alphie?” he asked, grinning at him. He played the first notes of *J’irai où tu iras* by Céline Dion and Jean-Jacques Goldman.

Alphard did a sort of shriek, grabbing Harry’s arm. “I want to be Céline!”

“No, I’m Céline,” Harry said, laughing.

“I don’t want to be Goldman,” Alphard grumbled.

“Come on, you’ll be loads better than him,” Harry said. “I’ll get Tom to play the piano. Gaspar, do you have the sheet music for *J’irai où tu iras*?”

“Yep!” Gaspar said, handing him the paper.

Harry smiled, going over to Tom. “Can you play this for us?”

Tom raised an eyebrow in his direction, looking him up and down. “You’re a mess,” he said, taking the sheet of paper.

“Just a bit of fun,” Harry said, leaning against the piano.

Tom hummed, setting the paper on the music stand. “Yes, I can play this for you.”

“Brilliant,” Harry said, grinning at him.

“Abraxas,” Alphard said into the microphone, swaying on his feet, “why don’t you lead lovely Viola in a dance? Tu sais danser le rock, non?”

Harry saw Abraxas go red, glancing at Viola.

“Luna!” Theo said, taking the microphone from Alphard. “Let me lead you in a dance.”

“I would love to!” Luna said happily, bounding over to him.

Harry saw Viola accept Abraxas’s hand, grinning at him. “Ready, Alphie?” he said when he got back to Alphard.

“Prêt, Céline,” he replied, grinning.

“Ready, Tom?” he asked, looking over at him.

Tom nodded, sending him a small smile.

Harry grinned, and started playing. Alphard's energy was unmatched, and Harry smiled all throughout the song. His French wasn't the best, but he knew enough, and God had he heard Sirius sing this song enough to know it by heart. A few people other than Abraxas and Theo were leading people in a dance, doing a fairly good job of not getting in each other's way, despite how sloshed Theo and Abraxas were.

It was strange seeing Tom play something so upbeat on the piano, so used to seeing him playing classical music. He looked to be having a bit of fun with it though, so that was nice.

When the song finished, the people in the room cheered, laughing at the dancers who were all out of breath.

"Ricky, come up here," Alphard said into the microphone. "I know you can sing *Jailhouse Rock*, and I know Tom's a brilliant rock dancer."

Harry blinked, laughing. "You kicking me out of the band?"

Alphard turned to him, giving him a sly smile. "Well, Tom needs a dance partner, doesn't he?"

Harry's eyes widened as Theo whistled loudly, egging Tom on.

"You're all pathetic," Tom said, getting up and holding a hand out to Harry. "Do you know the steps?"

Harry blinked, nodding. "I do," he said, scrambling to set the guitar down and take Tom's hand.

Tom led him down into the open space, rolling his eyes as people whistled. Rick got up onto the stage while the others up there got organised.

"You're all sticky," Tom said, scrunching his nose up as he looked at Harry.

Harry laughed, picking at his t-shirt that was sticking to him.

"Look at you," Tom said, getting a hold on Harry's jaw, tilting his chin back quite roughly, his thumb digging into the underside of his jaw.

Harry swallowed, his drunk mind going blank as Tom leant down and licked a stripe up his cheek where some whiskey had stuck.

Amidst the whistling that Tom's gesture elicited, Theo had stepped up to the microphone and said, "Don't mind Tom, he's just marking his territory. He's weird and possessive like that."

Tom stepped back. "Fuck you," he said to Theo.

Theo grinned down at him, while Harry was still trying to gather the scattered pieces of his mind, the feel of Tom's tongue still heavy on his skin. "Don't threaten me with a good time, darling."

Tom rolled his eyes, ignoring him, while everyone else laughed at the antics.

“Alright, ready?” Rick asked, pushing Theo away from the microphone.

“Keep up,” Tom said, hooking a finger under Harry’s chin to get him to look up, before wiping away the spit on his cheek, a smirk adorning his features.

Harry didn’t have time to think, relying solely on his muscle memory from when his dad had taught him how to dance to *Jailhouse Rock*. Despite the surrealism of the situation, Harry had fun. Tom was a good dancer, despite what he said, and he twirled Harry quickly, going through the steps to perfection.

Harry laughed when Tom picked him up, wrapping his arms around him once he was back on his feet.

Rick, to Harry’s surprise, did a really good rendition of the song.

When they’d finished, people started requesting other songs, and Harry got back onstage. Amidst more drinks they performed: *Under Pressure* by Queen and David Bowie, *The Way* by Fastball, *Don’t you (Forget About Me)* by Simple Minds, and *Disorder* by Joy Division.

Professor McGonagall actually requested they perform something by Remus, or *The Marauders*, the band he, Sirius, and Harry’s dad had formed when they were younger. Harry was all too happy to sing *It’s Not Living (If It’s Not With You)*, a song Sirius had written for the band, and *Teenagers*, one his dad had written.

By that point Harry was getting tired and his throat hurt so he agreed to one more song, requested by Alphard: *I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For* by U2.

And, if Harry happened to look at Tom when he said, *but I still haven’t found what I’m looking for*, well, that was between them.

When it was finished, the huge amount of people that had gathered throughout the afternoon, spilling into the hallway beyond the music room, and standing outside the open windows, cheered. Even Tom clapped, smiling at Harry from his perch on the piano.

When Harry was helping Gaspar pack up the instruments by the back of the stage, and Theo was busy mopping the floor around the microphone, Alphard sidled up beside him, sporting a smirk.

“Roxanne was talking to Tom,” he said, leaning against the wall, looking like he held a juicy secret in his hands. Harry almost flinched at the words, jealousy flaring up for a second as he glanced over his shoulder, seeing nothing but Tom watching Theo mop with a look of disdain on his face. “D’you know what they were saying?”

“No?” Harry said, straightening up to look at Alphard properly, frowning at him.

“She said, ‘*your boyfriend’s really talented*’,” he said, a grin splitting his face in two. Gaspar leant closer, eager to hear what Alphard was saying. “D’you know what Tom said?”

Harry rolled his eyes, trying to ignore his hammering heart. “Just tell me.”

Alphard looked at him, his eyes twinkling with glee. “He said, ‘*I know*’.”

Gaspar gasped. “Oh my god,” he whispered, eyes wide as he looked at Harry.

Harry’s heart stopped. He ran through his head every single scenario where Alphard could have misheard, where Tom had just been joking.

“You’re kidding,” Gaspar said, a delighted laugh escaping him as he turned back to Alphard.

Alphard seemed beyond pleased as he smiled, shaking his head. “I’m not, I swear to God,” he said, eyes softening as he looked at Harry.

“Maybe—” Harry swallowed, feeling like the earth had caved in under him. “Maybe he misheard? Maybe you misheard?”

Alphard smiled, wrapping an arm around Harry’s shoulders. “I promise I didn’t,” he said earnestly.

Harry swallowed again, glancing back at Tom who was rolling his eyes at something Theo said, leaning back against the piano.

— Scene eight —

The hangover was killer. Even when they got back to the chapel, they continued drinking. They ordered a takeaway, and Gaspar played record after record on his vinyl player, keeping them in high spirits. They had so much fun, and when they all staggered up to bed, Harry didn't even have time to linger on the fact that Tom hadn't corrected someone calling him his boyfriend—he just sunk into bed and fell asleep seconds later.

Harry woke up Sunday morning, face pressed into Tom's back. He didn't even remember them getting into the same bed. He wasn't complaining though, so he merely snuggled closer.

Tom made a small noise, a hum, in his sleep. His hand found Harry's wrapped around his waist, and he laced their fingers together, sighing.

Harry smiled against his shoulder blade, pressing a small kiss there, before drifting back off to sleep.

When he woke up again later on in the morning, he was tucked under Tom's arm, his fingers passing through Harry's hair.

He yawned into Tom's side, arm tightening around his middle.

"You awake?" Tom murmured, nosing at his hair.

Harry hummed, rubbing at his eyes that felt sticky. "Feel like shit though," he mumbled.

Tom chuckled, the sound deep, reverberating against Harry's ear. "That's what a whole day of drinking will do."

"Are you not hungover?" Harry asked, leaning back to look up at him.

"A bit," Tom said. "I didn't drink as much as you though. Do you even remember coming to bed?"

"Not really," Harry admitted with a sheepish smile.

Tom hummed. "Yeah, I didn't think so."

"Why?" Harry asked, suddenly taken with a vague sense of panic. "What happened?"

Tom frowned at him. "Nothing, you just seemed really tired. I made you drink some water and helped you get your t-shirt off though."

"Oh, thanks," Harry said, relieved. He always tried to not get *too* drunk or high around Tom. He wasn't willing to take the risk of confessing his feelings under the influence or something equally as embarrassing. "What time is it?"

"Er—" Tom leant over him a bit, most likely to see the clock, "just after half ten."

“That’s alright,” Harry said, twisting in Tom’s hold until he was facing the other side. He reached out and unlatched the window, pushing it open, letting the fresh April air pour into the room. He sighed, sagging back into the bed, his back to Tom.

Tom ran his fingers along his spine, making him shiver. “Too hot?”

Harry hummed. “Feel sweaty and nasty.”

“You’re probably just a bit warm ‘cause you just woke up,” Tom murmured, wrapping an arm around his waist, plastering himself to his back.

“You’re not helping,” Harry mumbled, though he was smiling.

“Don’t care,” Tom said, pulling him more securely into himself.

Harry huffed out a laugh, curling himself into Tom a bit more. He was careful, like Tom always was, to not shove his arse directly onto his cock. They always kept a couple inches of distance in that regard, whenever they could. It was an unspoken rule between them.

They were quiet for a while, nothing but the sounds of the birds outside and their breathing to be heard in their room, as well as the odd shuffle in the sheets.

“You spoke to Sirius the other day, didn’t you?” Tom said quietly, his breath fanning against the shell of Harry’s ear.

“Yeah,” Harry murmured. “Think it was Thursday, why?”

“How is he?” Tom asked.

Harry took a deep breath, physically feeling how his heart swelled at Tom’s attention. It was always thrilling to have him show interest in his family. Harry craved it, he craved that level of intimacy, of closeness. It was something he loved about Ron and Hermione, how casual they were with Sirius and Remus, an implicit sense of care between them all.

“He’s good, yeah,” Harry said, sighing into Tom’s hold. “Got out of rehab a couple weeks ago, but I told you that, didn’t I?” Tom hummed, nodding against his head. “Yeah, well, Remus has moved into Sirius’s house for the time being, but if everything goes well I’m guessing he’s gonna stay. He’s doing really well, actually. He’s in contact with his agent again, and he’s been writing some music with Remus.”

“That’s great,” Tom said, and it sounded genuine. “He’s coming to the play, yeah?”

“Yep,” Harry said happily, feeling excitement already start to bubble up in his stomach. He couldn’t wait to see Sirius again. “Him, Remus, Hermione, and Ron.”

“That’s nice,” Tom replied, squeezing Harry against him.

Harry hummed, trying to remember when he’d ever felt so content before. “I meant to ask,” he said, shuffling a bit, “what did Dumbledore hold you back for on Monday? I keep forgetting to ask.”

“He just wanted to let me know he appreciates us casting a fourth year,” Tom explained. “It’s rare for seventh years to cast anyone under sixth year. But I think that’s stupid. Not all sixth years are good, and not all students below that are bad. You don’t magically get good in sixth year, either you’re good or you’re not. It’s just about seeing potential.”

“I agree,” Harry said, smiling to himself. “That’s nice of him though, to point it out.”

“I suppose,” Tom said, one of his fingers slipping under the chain around Harry’s waist. It was silent for a while again, both of them basking in the lazy Spring morning. “My arm’s going numb,” Tom said eventually, turning back onto his back and reclaiming the arm that was under Harry’s head.

“Sorry,” Harry said with a small laugh as he turned around. He threw an arm over Tom’s waist, hooking a leg over him as well.

“Are we staying in bed all day?” Tom asked, resting his arm around him again, despite his earlier complaints.

Harry hummed. “There’s not much else to do.”

“You might need a shower at some point,” Tom said, a teasing lilt to his voice.

Harry looked up at him, blinking against the blur in his eyesight. “Are you saying I stink?”

“You still smell a bit of whiskey.”

Harry groaned. “I literally showered when we got back yesterday.”

“You were drunk,” Tom stated, “you probably didn’t shower very well.”

Harry hummed. The shower had been an odd sort of experience—he’d giggled to himself, had spent the better part of five minutes just staring off into space, thinking about what Alphard had said while water hammered down on him, and had indulged in a much needed wank. He couldn’t actually remember having washed his hair.

“I think you might be right,” he conceded. “I’ll go in later.”

“It can wait,” Tom assured, proving Harry didn’t smell *that* bad by nosing at his hair.

Thinking about what Alphard had said again meant that Harry couldn’t get the thought out of his mind. More than anything he desperately wanted to know if that was actually what had been said, but he had no idea how to bring the subject up.

“Yesterday was fun,” he tried, cringing to himself.

“Yes, it was,” Tom agreed easily. “You’re *very* good at playing the guitar. And singing. Even though I don’t quite see the appeal of the genre, it was all very impressive.”

Harry smiled. “Thank you,” he said, rubbing his nose against Tom’s ribs. “I can’t believe so many people joined in,” he said, attempting to broach the subject. “Roxanne was nice,” he

added, and it didn't sound casual at all. It sounded suggestive. He cringed again.

The movement of Tom's fingers stilled against his spine, and Harry felt him tense a bit. "I suppose," he said carefully.

"Yeah," Harry said faintly, losing his nerve.

It was quiet for a moment, but Tom didn't relax again, if anything, he seemed to be growing tenser. "Are you—" he cleared his throat— "are you interested? In her?"

"What?" Harry said, lifting himself up onto his elbow to look at Tom properly. He hadn't been expecting that. "No, of course not," he said, sounding defensive. "I just—I saw you two talking, is all."

He laid back down, incapable of looking him in the eye.

"Oh," Tom said, shuffling against him a bit. "Do you—do you think *I'm* interested in her?" he asked, sounding tentative.

"No," Harry said, laughing incredulously. He pinched Tom's side gently. "I thought you weren't even into girls."

"I'm not," Tom stated firmly. "I just thought that maybe you'd forgotten."

Difficult thing to forget, Harry thought.

"She actually—" Tom went on, hesitant, and Harry held his breath— "she just told me you were talented."

"Oh?" Harry said, feigning surprise. "And what did you have to say to that?"

"I said, *I know*," Tom replied easily, making Harry smile. "She actually, er—" he laughed, but it was almost nervous— "she actually said, *'your boyfriend's very talented,'* meaning you."

Harry's breathing stopped, feeling dazed. "How did you know she was talking about me?" he asked in a whisper, the air shifting between them.

"She gestured to you," Tom said, fingers resuming their slow stroke along his spine.

"Oh," Harry said faintly, shivering at the touch. "What did you say?"

"I told you," Tom said, perplexed, "I said, *I know*."

"About the boyfriend thing," Harry clarified, sounding a bit breathless.

"Oh," he paused, setting his chin on Harry's head, "nothing."

"Nothing?" Harry echoed faintly.

"I couldn't be bothered, to be honest," Tom said casually, though Harry could feel how his heart rate had sped up under his fingertips. "It was very noisy in the room."

“Right,” Harry said, swallowing. He couldn’t believe Tom had admitted to it. Couldn’t even begin to comprehend what any of it meant.

“You don’t mind, do you?” Tom asked in a murmur.

“No,” Harry said quickly, “‘course not.”

“Okay,” Tom whispered, “good.”

Harry didn’t know what to say, so he stayed quiet. It wasn’t the quiet of a few minutes ago, it was a quiet forced by too much said, and too many things left unsaid.

“How…how have you been feeling about the play?” Harry asked after his head started pounding at the constant reeling it was doing. He needed to change the subject, and it was a good opportunity; Tom had been a bit secretive about the play as of late, as if something was bothering him but he didn’t want to talk about it.

“What do you mean?” Tom asked, passing a hand through Harry’s hair.

“It might just be an impression,” Harry said carefully, “but I feel like you’re not happy with something about the play—I dunno.”

“Really?” Tom asked, sounding genuinely surprised. “I didn’t think it was noticeable.”

“So there is something?” Harry asked, tilting his head back to look up at him. He didn’t like the small frown pinching Tom’s brows together, or the little sigh he let out as if something was truly troubling him. The hand Harry had at his waist splayed out, his fingers rubbing against his hip gently.

Tom sighed against him, his ribcage expanding under Harry’s head. “I suppose,” he said eventually. “It’s not something concrete though, it’s just—I’m facing a bit of a dilemma.”

Harry frowned. “Can I help?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Tom said quietly, holding Harry a bit tighter. “It’s something I’ve got to figure out myself.”

“What’s it about?” Harry asked anyway.

Tom hesitated for a second, and Harry felt him tilt his head back, as if he were looking out of the window, or up at the ceiling. “It’s about the title of the play,” he confessed.

“What about it?”

“I can’t settle on anything,” he said, sounding frustrated. “I feel like I’ve assigned too much importance to it, like—if I could just decide on a title, it would clear up everything that’s…unclear in my mind.”

Harry frowned, unsure if Tom wasn’t making much sense, or if it was just him who couldn’t understand. “It sounds like you might be putting too much pressure on yourself,” he ended up

saying.

“It’s not that,” Tom said, picking at the wall unconsciously. “I suppose I’ve just been worrying about what’s important, and what’s worth it—and because I don’t know, I’m not sure what to call the play.”

“You’re being very cryptic,” Harry said, laughing lightly.

Tom smiled down at him, reaching out to tuck some of Harry’s hair behind his ear. “Sorry—I don’t think I want to talk about it.”

Harry nodded. “That’s fine—just, if you need help, I’m here.”

“I know you are,” Tom said softly.

Harry revelled in the attention Tom gave him, the *affection* with which he touched him. He craved it, couldn’t get enough of it. It was so tender, how Tom’s fingers against his spine held him close, how his thumb stroked along Harry’s cheek as he brushed the hair out of his face.

Harry was so in love with him, and it went so far beyond the physical intimacy he craved. Of course he wanted him, of course he wanted to kiss him, but it was more than that. It was the desire to just have; to have Tom’s smiles, and his words, to just have his attention. He could watch Tom for hours, just be in proximity to him forever—his love went so far beyond the need for it to be *requited*.

“I’ve been thinking,” Harry said quietly after a stretch of silence, his eyes having fluttered shut at some point, “remember you told me about that girl that helped you audition? At the orphanage?”

“Amelia?” Tom said, sounding surprised at the subject of conversation.

Harry hummed. “Wouldn’t she like to come and see you? You know, for the play.”

Tom’s hand movements stilled. “She never expressed any particular interest.”

“I bet she’d like to if you asked her to come.”

“She’s—” Tom shifted under him, turning back onto his side so Harry’s face was buried in his chest. “She works at an orphanage, Harry, I don’t think she’s got money to spare to travel all the way up to Scotland. And if she did, I doubt she’d use it for this, same goes for her time off.”

Harry was quiet for a moment, picking almost nervously at a loose thread from Tom’s boxers. “Listen,” he said, clearing his throat, “I know what you’re gonna say, but please just *think* about it. I would like to send her the money, for the train fare at least.”

“Harry, absolutely not—”

“Tom, please,” Harry said, leaning back so they were face to face. He put a hand over Tom’s mouth, silencing him. “Just—I would like it if someone came to see you play, and I bet she’d

love it. Just—think about it. Or give her a ring, see if she'd want to, at least."

Tom forcibly removed Harry's hand from his mouth, pinning it to his side. "Stop throwing money at me."

"I'm not throwing money at you," Harry said, rolling his eyes as he tried to bite back his amused grin. "I am offering to do something nice for you."

"Harry—"

"It was my idea anyway, and I'd like to take credit for it," he said, cutting Tom's complaints off. "I'm selfish like that, I want Amelia to know."

"You're not selfish," Tom said, rolling his eyes as he squeezed Harry's wrist that was still in his hand, "so shut up. You're just trying to trick me into agreeing."

Harry smiled, tilting his head back to see Tom better.

"I don't think it's a bad idea," Tom said softly. "I'm sure Amelia would be happy to come and see the play, but that doesn't mean that *you* have to pay for it. I can, if I have to."

"I'd much rather I pay for it," Harry said. "Look, Tom, I've got fifty quid lying around on my desk. I might as well use it to pay for her train fare."

"And I have fifty pounds in my bank account—probably," Tom said unconvincingly.

Harry freed his wrist from his hold and reached out to trace his jaw with his thumb. "Let me send her the money. You just ring her."

Tom closed his eyes, leaning into Harry's hand. He grumbled something before saying, "I'll pay you back."

Harry smiled. "Okay," he said. He had no intention of letting Tom pay him back, but he knew there was no point in fighting him on it. "We should go and give her a ring then, in case you change your mind."

Tom opened his eyes, a smile pulling at his lips. "Okay then, but we're coming back to bed afterwards."

Harry laughed, nodding. "'Course, come on then."

He rolled out of bed and put on the first t-shirt he came across.

"I just need to find the number," Tom said absentmindedly as he rifled through some books on his desk. He was still shirtless, and it was surprising how Harry never got tired of the sight, how it never failed to make his blood feel hot.

"I'll go to the bathroom then quickly," Harry said, leaving the room.

When he got downstairs, Tom was in the kitchen with Alphard, who seemed to be the only other person up.

“Morning, Alphie,” he said happily, going over to the sink to get a glass of water.

“Hi Harry,” Alphard replied. “I made some coffee, but I’m gonna go back to bed, I’m knackered.”

Harry laughed. “Are you hungover too?”

“Majorly,” Alphard said dramatically, yawning. “I’ll see you two later.”

“See you later, Alphard,” Tom said, pouring two cups of coffee out of the pot Alphard had made.

“Did you find the number?” Harry asked, putting some milk in his own cup.

“Yeah.”

“Come on then,” Harry said, beckoning him over to the hallway, “let’s ring.”

Tom followed begrudgingly. He set his cup on the stairs as he picked the phone up, unfolding the piece of paper in his hand and dialling the number.

Harry leant up on his tiptoes to rest his chin on Tom’s shoulder so that he could hear. The phone rang twice before someone picked up.

“*Wool’s orphanage, Ms. Cole speaking*,” a woman said. Her voice wasn’t one Harry would class as welcoming, she sounded stern.

Tom cringed, removing the phone from his ear. He looked like he was going to hang it back up on the wall, but thought better of it and pressed it back up against his ear.

“Hello,” he said, sounding odd, “is Amelia there?”

“*Who is this?*” Ms. Cole asked, sounding annoyed.

Tom huffed. “It’s er—Tom, Tom Riddle.”

“*Riddle*?” the woman repeated, her voice having grown in pitch. “*What the bloody hell do you want?*”

Tom scowled. “Just put Amelia on the phone.”

“*I don’t think you’re in any place to tell me what to do, you little shit,*” Ms. Cole snapped, her cockney accent thick as anything. Harry’s eyes widened and he looked up at Tom in alarm.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Tom said, rolling his eyes. “Can you please just put Amelia on the phone.”

"*You better not be wanting to come back, I'll tell you that,*" Ms. Cole huffed out, "*you know you're too old, and we wouldn't have you anyway!*"

Tom's cheeks had grown red in annoyance, and he pressed the phone harder against his ear. "I wouldn't come back to your shithole if there was a gun to my head, you absolute twat," he spat, and Harry's jaw dropped. "Just put Amelia on the fucking phone."

"*Ingrateful shit,*" Ms. Cole mumbled. "*Amelia*!" she shouted. It was silent for a while, time in which Harry tried to catch Tom's eye but it was a futile endeavour. "*Amelia, love, it's Riddle, he wants to have a word.*"

There was some static noise through the line but a soft spoken voice came through, sounding much nicer than the awful Ms. Cole. "*Tom? Tom, is that you? Are you alright?*"

"Hi, Amelia," Tom said, his voice much softer.

"*Oh Tommy, how are you doing*?" she said, sounding delighted.

"I'm good," Tom said, and Harry saw the small smile at the corner of his mouth. "How are you?"

"*Oh, you know*," she said vaguely, "*same as always. What can I do for you, love*?"

"Well," Tom said, fidgeting nervously, "you know I'm in my last year at school?"

"'*Course, yeah*."

"Well, as our last er—production, we're gonna perform a play we've written ourselves, and I just—" he paused, toying with the phone cord— "I just wanted to know if you'd like to come? And watch?"

Harry hated how hesitant his voice was.

"*Seriously?*" Amelia asked, sounding breathless. "*Tom I'd love to! You know I would! Gosh, I can't believe you actually thought to ask me, wow!*"

"Oh," Tom said, blinking in surprise. Harry smiled.

"*Gosh, yeah—when? Where?*" Amelia asked. "*Oh wait, that's a silly question. When is it, darlin'? I'll have to get some time off, and I'm sure I can ask for an advanced pay for accommodation and all that—*"

"Amelia," Tom cut in, his cheeks red, "slow down. We're doing the play on the 29th and 30th of June. Friends and family of the seventh years get lodged for free in the village, the school pays for it."

"*Oh!*" Amelia exclaimed. "*Oh, in that case, no problem. I'll have to see with Ms. Cole for an advanced pay for the train fare, it's quite expensive from London to Scotland, but I'll be there!*"

Harry nudged Tom, urging him to tell her the train fare would be paid for as well.

"Er—listen, Amelia."

"*Yeah, what is it?*"

Tom glanced down at Harry. "I've got a friend here, who has kindly offered to send you some money for the train fare. He's the one who insisted you come."

"*What? Are you serious, Tom?*" she said, sounding bewildered.

"I know, I know," Tom said, cringing. "But he insisted, and he's minted, so don't worry about it. I said I'd pay him back, so take it as me offering to pay."

"*What? Put this lad on the phone, Tommy*."

Tom handed Harry the phone, giving him a pointed look. Harry took it, feeling a bit put on the spot.

"Hi," he said tentatively, "I'm Harry."

"*Hiya Harry*," Amelia said kindly, and Tom leant down to listen in, "*it's a very kind offer, love. But I can't possibly accept.*"

"Oh no," Harry said quickly. "I insist, really. Look, the most important thing is that you come, I can send you the money without issue, I can go down to the post office tomorrow."

"*I assure you, Harry, as much as I appreciate it, I can get by—*"

Tom took the phone back from him, rolling his eyes. "Listen, Amelia, he's not gonna let it go, and if you don't say yes he's going to nag at me for months on end. Just take the money and I'll sort it out."

Harry heard Amelia laugh over the phone.

"Are you sure, Tommy?"

"Positive," Tom said. "I told you, he's minted. I'll pay him back later."

"*Alright then,"* she conceded.

"Good," Tom said. "You'll just have to get the train on the 28th, okay? And then I'll find a way to get us back to London. I'll let my Professor know you're coming and he'll make sure you get a room in the village."

"*Alright then, Tom. I'll have a word with Ms. Cole, make sure I won't be too missed. And thank you for the invite, and thank you to your friend. It's very kind of you to think of me."*

Tom smiled lightly. "No problem, Amelia. Ring us if you need to, you can save this number."

"*Okay love, I'll give you a ring to let you know if everything's alright.*"

“Okay, bye Amelia,” Tom said.

“*Bye Tom, and say bye to Harry as well, he sounds like a lovely lad. Do you fancy a word with Ms. Cole?*”

“Absolutely not,” Tom replied, scrunching his nose up.

Amelia laughed. “*Alright then bye bye, darlin’, it’s lovely to hear from you*.”

“Bye Amelia,” Tom said before hanging up the phone.

“She seems lovely,” Harry said, leaning back against the stairs’ handrail.

“Not a fan of Ms. Cole?” Tom asked, biting back a grin.

Harry snorted. “Can’t say I was, no.”

“Come on, back to bed,” Tom said, leading the way up the stairs after picking his coffee cup up.

Harry followed, amused, and also quite relieved that Amelia had agreed to come. “Is it normal for her to talk to you like that?” he asked once they were back in their room.

“Ms. Cole?” Tom asked, tugging his t-shirt over his head.

Harry hummed, taking his own off.

“No,” Tom said, laughing. “She just doesn’t like me, at all. When I left for good I called her a drunken whore, and I doubt she’s forgotten.”

“What?” Harry said, laughing in surprise.

“She was having a go at me because I refused to grovel at her feet and thank her for all she’d ever done for me, which was nothing,” Tom explained, taking his trousers off. “She called me a ponce, so I called her a drunken whore.”

“You are a bit of a ponce,” Harry said, grinning at him.

Tom gave him a look, his eyes narrowed. “She called me a fag too, the bitch. Then I called her a slag and told her that I knew she’d been sleeping with the priest.”

Harry laughed. “She was right with that one too.”

Tom tackled him onto the bed, both of them laughing like idiots. “Says you,” he said, digging his thumbs into Harry’s ribs.

Harry laughed, trying to push Tom off him. “Seems like you were just stating facts about each other,” he managed to say between gasps of laughter.

“Oh, piss off,” Tom said, tickling him in earnest.

“The coffee! The coffee!” Harry exclaimed when his foot came dangerously close to kicking one of the cups off the nightstand.

Tom relented, pushing himself off Harry with a last flick to his forehead. “Wanker,” he huffed, a small laugh following his insult.

Harry grinned at him, catching his breath.

— Scene nine —

Their weekend off did them a lot of good, even though they all spent the majority of Sunday recovering from Saturday.

As the weeks wore on, they continued rehearsing for the play and helping the art students as much as they could in building the set.

April bled into May, and they started the off book repetitions. By that point they basically knew their lines, so the repetitions were much smoother than they had been for *Hamlet*; it was more about making sure the production happened without any technical errors.

It was the first time, however, that they were rehearsing in costume, with the set more or less finished behind them.

Harry stayed in the dressing rooms while the others rehearsed the first Act, with him not featuring in it. His costume took the longest to put on anyway, and Luna and Lysandra were kind enough to help him with it.

“Do you have your contact lenses, Harry darling?” Luna asked, her dreamy voice so lovely in the quiet dressing room. She’d taken to calling him ‘Harry darling’ after the Tom Incident, as Harry had dubbed it in his mind. Luna calling him that constantly made it hard for him to forget how it had sounded coming out of Tom’s mouth.

“In my bag,” Harry said, pointing to it lying on the floor. “But I usually keep my glasses on for rehearsals, Luna. They irritate my eyes.”

“Oh,” she said quietly. “Would you mind wearing them just for today? I was hoping to put some makeup on you, like in Tom’s initial sketch. It’ll look better without your glasses.”

“I suppose,” Harry said, turning to look at Lysandra. “Could you grab them for me please, Lysandra? They’re just in the inner pocket of my bag.”

“Of course, Harry,” she said happily.

Luna sat on the dressing table in front of where Harry was sitting, effectively caging him in between her legs. “Let’s see,” she murmured, looking at him intently. “I think we’ll go with some eyeliner and mascara to bring out your eyes more.”

“Go ahead,” Harry said, smiling up at her.

It was always a complicated experience having makeup put on, especially around the eyes. Harry’s eyes watered very easily, though he was relieved to see Luna apply liquid eyeliner on his lids, instead of pencil on his waterline.

“Oh, careful, you could cut yourself on that wing,” she said, giggling as she finished his right eye.

He laughed along, finding her endearing. “Does it look good?”

“Yes,” she said easily. “You really suit this look very well, I’m sure Tom must have had you specifically in mind for this design.”

“Oh wow,” Lysandra said as she came up beside them to hand Harry his contacts, “you look really good, Harry. Your eyes are so pretty.”

“Thanks, Lys,” Harry said, smiling at her as best he could while Luna did his left eye.

“Here, Harry, put your contacts in before I do the mascara,” she instructed, capping the eyeliner off.

“Are you sure mascara’s a good idea?” he asked, taking one of the contacts out of the box. “My eyes water enough with just my contacts.”

“We’ll make it work,” Luna said. “Let’s just hope your eyes don’t go all red.”

He hummed as he put his contacts in, blinking rapidly once it was done. His eyesight adjusted as best it could, and his eyes only watered a bit.

Luna set to applying the mascara carefully. When she was finished she looked him over, seemingly weighing something up in her mind.

“What are you thinking?” Harry prompted.

She smiled at him, happy he’d caught on, before leaning over and grabbing a palette and what looked like stencils. “I found these,” she said, holding up the stencils that were drawn in the shape of olive branches, “and thought it would really suit the look if we put them on your temples, what do you think? In gold, of course.”

Harry smiled, bemused. “You’re the pro, go ahead.”

She seemed more than pleased and set to work quickly. She held the stencil up to his temple, placing it properly, while she tapped a brush into the golden part of the palette.

“Is that eyeshadow?” Lysandra asked quizzically.

Luna shook her head. “No, it’s a special kind of body paint, but it’s more like a powder. It has a lot more pigment and consistency than eyeshadow. It has this almost velvety texture, look.”

“I see,” Lysandra said, eyeing the palette.

Luna finished one side and went to do the other. “Oh this is perfect,” she said happily. “It’s glittery.”

Harry almost frowned before he remembered not to. “Is glittery a good thing?”

“Well,” she said, applying the second pattern, “the gold on its own would be a bit bland, the glitter makes it stand out more.”

“Right,” Harry said, trusting her to make it look good.

When Luna was finished and was just getting down from the dressing table, Alphard appeared in their little area.

“Harry, we’re waiting for you for Act two,” he said, rounding Harry’s chair to face him. He stopped short when Harry looked up at him, jaw going slack. “Oh my god,” he whispered, “you look *gorgeous*.”

Harry laughed, rolling his eyes. “Thanks. I think I’m done anyway, right, Luna?”

“Wait just a moment,” she said, leaning over the dressing table, “I must crown you!”

Harry laughed as she brandished the crown, depositing it on his head. She messed about with his hair for a few seconds, pulling bits and pieces this way and that.

“Okay, you’re ready!” she said happily.

“Thank you, Luna,” Harry said as he stood up. He glanced at the mirror and came to halt, blinking at his reflection. He *did* look good. The whole costume looked great; the arm bands wrapped around his biceps, the thin bracelets around his wrists, the rings adorning his fingers. The eyeliner was *very* sharp, but it looked really good on him, and the golden glittery olive branches on his temples looked surprisingly good, tying the whole look together.

“God, your costume is *so* good,” Alphard said, eyeing him from all angles. “You really outdid yourself, Luna.”

Harry realised no one other than him, Tom, Luna, and Lysandra had actually seen his costume up until then, and he wondered idly what the others would think.

“Thank you, Alphie,” Luna said happily. “I do think Harry wears it very well.”

Alphard laughed incredulously as he looked over Harry again. “Right,” he said, looking up, “we’ll go start scene one, Rick will be waiting for you by the stage. And me, I suppose.”

“Okay, I’ll be right behind you,” Harry said, watching him run off. “I’ll see you two later,” he said to Luna and Lysandra as he left, making his way towards the stage.

He passed by a lot of younger students as he walked backstage, and they all did a double take when they saw him, their eyes widening comically. He smiled at them, unsure of whether it boosted his confidence or hindered it.

He crept up behind Rick and Alphard, careful to keep quiet as the others got into place.

“Shit, Harry,” Rick said as he caught sight of him, looking him up and down, “you look stunning.”

Harry snorted, surprised at such a compliment coming from Rick. “Cheers.”

“Fucking hell,” he said, seemingly unable to keep his eyes to himself.

Harry rolled his eyes, slapping his arm. “I’m still a bloke under all this, don’t forget that.”

Rick hummed noncommittally, and Alphard laughed beside him before shushing them and whispering, “They’re starting.”

Harry turned his attention to the stage, watching as Tom paced, Theo pretended to look out of a window at the back of the stage, and Gaspar and Abraxas stood to the side by the throne.

“*The elders are uneasy at the prospect of tension with France*,” Abraxas said, holding his arms behind his back which was ramrod straight.

Theo turned back towards the others onstage, pretending to fit a curtain back against the window. “*France does not pose an immediate threat. We have grounds to believe they could yield.*”

Tom sighed, slowing his pacing down long enough to look at Abraxas. “*You may tell the counsel to rest assured. The civil war has left the Nation desolate, the King is not ready for war. We are mightier, we will win.*”

“*I will, my Lord*,” Abraxas said dutifully. “*It is of the utmost importance we focus our attention on Italy, anyway*.”

Theo was looking out of the window again, and said, “*Lennon has just intercepted our guest. I see them in the courtyard*.” He paused, leaning closer to the figurative window before letting out a quiet, “*Oh my…*”

“*What is it*?” Tom asked immediately, stopping his pacing altogether.

Theo stepped away from the window, straightening down his costume. “*Nothing, my Lord. Nothing to worry about*.”

“*Will the Prince be arriving shortly*?” Gaspar asked, fiddling with the violin on his shoulder.

“*In the time it takes to walk from the courtyard to this very room*,” Theo replied.

“*I shall play then*,” Gaspar said, retreating to a further corner of the stage as he started playing softly.

Tom turned his attention over to Theo, eyes sharp. “*Does he have many companions with him*?” he asked, looking annoyed.

“*Just one*,” Theo said, almost reluctantly.

“*Unusual…*” Abraxas said, looking at Tom worriedly, “*perhaps this is not such a power play?*”

Theo shook his head, cutting in and capturing Tom’s attention, “*It could be a mockery, to insinuate that this is not important—that more people are not needed*.”

Tom was quiet before he scowled, turning back towards his throne. "*We do not have time to ruminate on it. We shall see*."

"That's my cue," Alphard whispered, sending a thumbs up to Harry and Rick as he rushed onto the stage, trying to sound out of breath as he said, *"My Lord! The Prince of Italy is here*!"

Tom turned around, looking straight at Alphard. "*Bring him in*."

Alphard turned back towards them and nodded their way.

Inexplicably, Harry's stomach twisted into knots as he followed Rick onto the stage.

Rick waited a moment once they were on the stage, while all the other boys' focus landed on Harry, their eyes wide. Gaspar stopped playing abruptly, silence falling in the theatre. "*The Crown Prince of Italy, Elio*," he said eventually, putting on a slight Italian accent.

Harry's eyes had locked with Tom's and they were not leaving him. He moved his foot just so, just enough for his ankle bracelet to make a noise in the dead silent theatre. "*Your Majesty*," he said, looking directly at Tom. He bent his knees by way of greeting, dipping his head only the slightest.

Theo marched forward a couple of steps, his eyes wide as he looked at Harry, before bowing deeply. "*Your Majesty, welcome*," he greeted.

Abraxas did the same, bowing from where he was still standing by the throne. "*We hope your journey was not too arduous, your Majesty*," he said once he had straightened back out.

It was silent for a moment, and Theo looked towards Tom in a panic. "*My Lord*," he prompted.

Tom blinked, his eyes still on Harry's as he marched forward, taking his hand in his. "Harry," he said breathlessly, before stopping short, blinking in surprise. "*Shit*," he swore, laughing as he took his hand back and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Shit, sorry."

Harry snorted, shaking his head. "S'okay," he assured, though his heart was beating *very* fast in his chest. The other boys laughed along.

"Can we start again?" Tom asked, dropping his hand from his face, revealing a blush high on his cheeks. "From when Alphard comes in?"

"Yeah, that's fine," Harry said, grinning up at him.

Tom looked down at him, his eyes wide and his lips parted. He shook his head, as if in disbelief, and reached out to grasp Harry's jaw in his hand, tilting his head this way and that. "Fuck, what has Luna done?"

"Do you hate it?" Harry asked, laughing.

"No, fuck," Tom said, inching closer. "You look—perfect, ethereal."

“Oh,” Harry said, feeling his face heat up.

“You look absolutely gorgeous, Harry,” Gaspar said, coming up to them. “Doesn’t he?” he said, looking up at Tom.

“He really does,” Tom agreed, his hand tilting Harry’s chin up.

The others piled over, fussing over his costume for a minute before they decided to get back to it.

Harry, Rick, and Alphard retreated backstage again, while the others got back into place, taking another second to get back into character.

When he was ready, Tom repeated the line, “*We do not have time to ruminate on it. We shall see*.” The scene played out from there, until Harry and Rick entered again, receiving the same greetings.

“*My Lord*,” Theo prompted again, when Tom did nothing but stare at Harry, like he was supposed to.

Tom blinked, marching forward and taking Harry’s hand in his. “*Elio*,” he said breathlessly, “*the sun*.” He bent down and kissed Harry’s hand, lingering for a moment in the tender gesture.

Harry smiled up at him once he had straightened out, still holding Harry’s hand in his. “*Your Majesty*.”

“*Alarik, please*,” Tom said, smiling at him.

“*I am grateful for your hospitality, Alarik*,” Harry said earnestly. “*My father sends his kind regards*.”

“*It is an honour to have you*, *Elio*,” Tom said, thumb stroking along his hand before he let go gently. “*Your journey went well, I presume.*”

“*As well as can be hoped, despite its longevity*,” Harry answered. The scene was supposed to be full of tension, Alarik and Elio completely wrapped up in one another, incapable of taking their eyes off each other. Harry thought they were nailing it.

“*You must rest then*,” Tom said, a playful smile on his lips. “*We have a ball organised in your honour tonight. I am sure Lennon mentioned it*.”

Alphard took a step towards them, his eyes wide in a panic. “*My Lord—”* he tried, the beginning of a confused protest dying on his tongue when Tom turned a scathing look on him. “*Of course*,” he amended, “*the ball. I must oversee the preparations of the event. Excuse me, your Majesties*.” He bowed low before exiting the stage in a hurry.

“*You mustn’t have, your Majesty*,” Harry said, reclaiming Tom’s attention.

“*Please, call me Alarik*,” Tom said. “*And it is a pleasure and a privilege to host your grace*.”

Harry laughed lightly, smiling wide. "*I was not informed the English were so well versed in flattery*."

Tom grinned, holding his hands behind his back, looking pleased. *"An oversight, I am sure*," he said, before turning to face the public, his eyes leaving Harry to gesture to Theo and Abraxas. *"I would like you to meet my counsellors, Fidel and Lamont. You have already met Lennon. And there is Delancey*," he pointed towards Gaspar playing the violin, "*who I am sure will treat you to his most wondrous poetry*."

He turned back towards Harry with an absolutely devastatingly charming smile, and it took Harry a beat longer than it should've to deliver his line. "*Poetry?*" he managed to say, smiling playfully up at Tom, and just for the drama of it all, he set a hand on his arm. "*You spoil me, Alarik. It is lovely to meet you all*," he said, letting go of Tom to look at the others before gesturing to Rick. "*I have brought along my friend, Alessandro, I hope it is not an issue.*"

Tom smiled tightly at Rick. "*Of course, you are both welcome.*" He turned back to Harry, reaching out to brush the bracelets on his wrists. "*I will let you rest, so that you may acquaint yourself with the castle and recuperate from your travels before the ball. Delancey, would you escort his Majesty the Prince to his rooms?"*

Gaspar stopped playing and rushed to their level. "*Of course, my Lord*."

Tom didn't take his eyes off Harry, taking his hand in his once again, their rings catching on each other. "*If you are in need of anything, please do not hesitate to call for me*."

"*Thank you, Alarik*," Harry said, looking up at him from under his lashes.

Tom swallowed, his smile faltering imperceptibly before it was back in place. "*I will see you tonight, Elio*," he said, letting go of his hand almost reluctantly.

"*I look forward to it,*" Harry said, turning towards Rick. He sent Tom a look over his shoulder, and with a smirk said, "*Arrivederci, Alarik*."

Tom just watched him go, until Harry, Rick, and Gaspar were once again backstage, watching the stage from where they stood. Harry gave Tom a thumbs up, grinning when he saw him break character for a second.

"*Are you quite well, my Lord?*" Theo asked, taking a tentative step towards Tom.

Tom whirled around, a blinding grin on his face. "*I am not certain, Fidel, though I fear I have never felt better*."

"*My Lord*?" Abraxas said, sharing a worried glance with Theo.

"*Has the sun always shone so bright*?" Tom asked, walking over to lean against the window where he peeled the curtain back, a certain volatile energy to him. "*Has the world always seemed so luminous? The sky always so blue? I do believe I thought everything to be quite grey, I feel like I have opened my eyes for the first time.*"

"*Oh*," Theo said, looking at him with wide eyes, "*oh no.*"

"*My Lord*," Abraxas said, taking a step towards Tom, an uneasy smile on his face, "*did you—did you enjoy meeting the Prince?*"

"*Did I enjoy it*?" Tom asked incredulously, whirling around. "*Lamont, does one typically not enjoy wondrous events? Does one lay eyes upon an angel and refute its beauty? Scorn its arrival?*"

There was a stunned sort of silence before Theo shook his head, clasping his hands together. "*Was it wise to speak of a ball, my Lord? Such an event cannot be prepared in an afternoon.*"

"*It shall be prepared and ready for this evening,"* Tom stated, leaving no room for argument. *"Threaten violence if you must, Fidel, but it shall be ready. And it shall be grand, fit for the Prince.*"

"*Of course, my Lord, we will have all the servants and courtiers lend a hand,"* Abraxas said quickly, sharing a look with Theo. *"The ballroom shall be ready for this evening. However, I must ask, is it still your wish that we occupy him during his visit?*"

Tom sputtered, throwing his hands up in despair. "*Of course not! Lamont, I fear I might die if I do not see him again.*"

"*Oh, good Lord*," Theo mumbled, turning away from Tom.

"*Fidel, do you remember my mother's locket?*" Tom asked out of the blue, making Theo turn back to him.

"*Her heirloom*?" Theo said incredulously. "*Of course, but why—*"

"Would he not look divine in it?" Tom said, once again gazing out of the window.

"*The Prince*?" Theo asked, sounding more and more perplexed.

"*Yes, Fidel, of course the Prince, who else?*" Tom said, exasperated. "*Elio would look phenomenal with my mother's locket wrapped around his throat. Have a servant send it to his rooms with a request that he wear it tonight.*"

"*My Lord*!" Abraxas exclaimed, outraged. "*Surely you do not plan on courting him? That is a traditional courting gift.*"

Tom turned to him, that dazed, manic look in his eyes that Harry never quite knew how he did so well. "*That is certainly an idea, is it not*?" he said quietly.

Theo took another step towards him. "*Alarik, I fear you are rushing into this—*"

Tom whirled around on him, pinning him to the spot with the intensity in his eyes. "*Should I not? You have begged me to find company, have presented me with every woman in the kingdom and half of the men. Should you not be relieved that I have set my sights on*

someone? Beyond his enchanting nature, our union should resolve all conflict with Italy for the time being, and would ensure a strong ally."

"*Yes but we still do not know why he is here*!" Theo exclaimed desperately. "*Why send his son instead of coming himself? The elusive son not a soul had heard of!*"

"*I understand now why he was kept hidden. The Nations would have been battling for his hand in an instant of his revelation to the world,"* Tom said, as if he had uncovered an important secret.

"*Exactly*!" Theo exclaimed. "*Why should he send him here, now?*"

"*Perhaps the King wishes to seal ties with England? Perhaps his purpose was for me to wed his son?*" Tom proposed, giving Theo a pointed look.

Theo sighed, looking dejected. "*I am suspicious, and if you would like my advice, you should be too.*"

"*If not suspicious, then wary, my Lord*," Abraxas said wisely.

Tom was quiet, returning to his pacing by the window. Finally, he said, "*Have a servant send the locket, Fidel. Lamont, find Lennon and help him.*"

"*Yes, my Lord*," Abraxas said immediately.

"Alarik—"

Tom ignored Theo, going on to say, "*I must consult some documents on Royal weddings, I fear I never paid them much mind.*"

"*Alarik—*"

"*Now, Fidel*," Tom snapped.

Theo looked like he wanted to argue, but he took a deep breath and fixed his angry posture. "*Very well, as you so wish*," he said tersely, before beckoning for Abraxas to follow him. They exited the stage, leaving only Tom.

He was quiet. He stood by the window, then paced before his throne for a few seconds, his hands behind his back. Before long, he was wringing his hands at his sides, a feral grin taking shape on his face.

"*I cannot recall having such interest in another before this instant. I have never seeked to know more, to discover more, of someone,*" he said, directing his attention towards the fictitious audience.

"He is beautiful, that is an uncontested truth, but there is more; his eyes shone with a thousand secrets, a million stars, and countless mysteries, and I wish to unravel them all," he spoke quickly, the madness shining in his eyes seeming very real. *"His jewellery alone shines as the blade of the sharpest of knives, and I have always been taken with cutting things."*

"He holds a power I covet but that I know nothing of—a power I wish to take, that I will take, if only he will allow me to. I will have it before the end of the night, of this I am certain."

He stopped talking, pausing as he looked out at the empty audience, before taking his leave and exiting the stage, joining the rest of them backstage.

Harry gave him a wide grin as he stepped backstage, always so impressed by how utterly *good* he was.

"Okay," Cassandra, one of the sixth year girls in charge of stage direction, said as she stepped in front of the stage, "that concludes Act two, scene one. There were no mistakes other than Tom's initial mess up which you sorted out amongst yourselves. The pacing, as well as your occupation of the stage, was very good. Keep it up, guys. Next is Elio and Alessandro, and we have a set change."

"You were really good," Tom said as he came up to Harry once he'd given Cassandra a thumbs up.

"I didn't have many lines," Harry said, smiling up at him.

"But you really captured what I'd envisioned for Elio," Tom said, reaching out to tuck a strand of Harry's hair back under the crown. "You were brilliant."

Harry grinned. "So were you, like always."

Tom smirked. "Ready to go back on?"

"Yeah," Harry said, twisting around to catch sight of Rick who was talking with Gaspar.

They got through the entirety of the play after that. The only thing they didn't do was the dance sequence in Act three, scene three. Tom asked that they not do it, saying he'd rather focus on line delivery. He told Harry, later on, that he'd just rather they perfect the dance together, before incorporating it into the full play.

"And that's the final curtain," Cassandra announced once they'd finished their run through.

Harry's chest was heaving but he grinned up at Tom, whose arms he was still in.

Tom smiled, setting him back on his feet carefully. "That was good, really good," he said happily. "How are your eyes?"

"Okay," Harry said, wiping at the corner of his right eye where a clump of tears was stuck to his eyelashes. "A bit itchy, but our play's much shorter than *Hamlet*."

"Tom, do you mind coming here for a second," Cassandra said, stepping up to the front of the stage. "Actually, all of you come here."

They did as told, regrouping on the stage.

“Okay,” Cassandra said, looking down at her clipboard. “Line delivery was good, there were a couple mistakes, especially in Act four, but they were easily overlooked. Your blocking in the action scenes was good, though I’d revise the scene between Alarik and Lennon a bit,” she advised, looking at Tom and Alphard. “Everything else was really good, you all stayed in character and the stage occupation was good too.”

“There were some lighting issues at times,” Tom said, crossing his arms.

Cassandra nodded, pushing her glasses up her nose. “I know, I’ll have a word with the students in charge of lighting. I marked everything down anyway, if you want to have a look, Tom.”

He nodded, taking the clipboard and pencil from her.

“Other than that,” Cassandra went on, “set changes were efficient and well done, and your costumes held up fine. Anything else?”

Tom scratched something out on the clipboard before handing it back to her.

“No, but we really need to think about the promotional stuff now,” Theo said, looking at them all. “We’ll need to come up with poster designs, and Tom we really need a name for the play.”

Tom scowled, his cheeks hollowing out as he bit the insides of them in a gesture Harry knew was one of agitation. “I know,” he said. “Soon, promise.”

“Do we have a plan for the posters?” Rick asked, unbuttoning his shirt.

“Er—Colin in sixth year art has a penchant for photography,” Alphard said. “You know, Colin Creevey? I could ask him. I know he’s got a good camera, and he’ll know the ins and outs of the studio here.”

“Oh, yes,” Abraxas said, “he’s the one who took the photos of the school for that article in the *Daily Mail*. They were very good.”

“Good thinking, Alphard,” Tom said. “Try and organise something for the beginning of May, for the photos at least, so that we have time to design the posters around them.”

“Yep, I’ll see if I can find him in the cafeteria tonight,” Alphard said.

“Is that everything then?” Cassandra asked.

Tom hummed. “I think so for today. We’ll do another run Friday, alright? We’ll stick to two a week for now, but once we get to June, and your productions are out of the way, we’ll be here everyday in the leadup to our play, okay?”

Cassandra smiled, nodding. “Fine by me, I’ll tell everyone else.”

“Okay, brilliant,” Theo said, clapping his hands together. “Let’s get changed then.”

“What are we doing when we get back?” Gaspar asked.

“Anyone want to play poker?” Abraxas proposed.

The resounding, “No,” echoed in the almost silent theatre, making them all laugh.

— Scene ten —

Time passed quickly, and Harry was so relieved they'd all been on top of the play and got the most pressing matters out of the way early on. It eased his nerves, to know that they already had costumes, the set, and everything else ready. That they all knew their lines, but were still intent on perfecting their performance.

The only things left to do were the promotional stuff that they had to have ready for June, and he and Tom needed to make sure they knew the dance.

Colin was all too happy to shoot their promotional photos for them. It took a whole day to do, and Harry was knackered by the end of it, his eyes itchy from spending a day in the photography studio with bright spotlights pointed on him, while wearing his contact lenses for the most part.

They decided on two alternative posters; one with Harry's side profile, the winged eyeliner and golden olive branches standing stark against his skin. The editing process made the green in his eyes shine, and frankly he'd never looked so good. He looked like a real Prince, with a crown and all. The lighting in the photo made it look like the sun was shining on him, a golden hue encapsulating him.

The other poster was, of course, of Tom. It was much the same set up as Harry's; his side profile, with his King's crown on his head. But, unlike Harry, he wasn't bathed in golden light, but swamped in a red hue. His shirt wasn't white, but black. He looked like true royalty, and Harry spent a long time ogling the photo, so incredibly taken with the small sneer he'd put on for it.

Once they had the name of the play, which they still didn't have, they were going to put it in block letters at the bottom of the posters, leaving them otherwise blank but for the dates of the play. The name would be written in white for Harry's poster, and black for Tom's.

The sense of urgency around the name of the play was growing, and Harry could tell that it was bothering Tom, but he didn't bring it up again.

It was getting late, a Friday night in mid May, and Harry and Tom were in the theatre practising the dance for Act three. The other boys, aside from Gaspar, had gone back to the chapel long ago.

Tom was breathing heavily as they finished the dance again—how many times they'd done it that night, Harry couldn't remember. "Shall we go again?" he asked, pushing his hair back from his forehead.

Harry took a breath, fighting the stitch in his side. "Yeah, okay."

"Guys," Gaspar said, sounding desperate, "do you mind if I go back? I'm knackered, it's past ten."

"Who will play the piano?" Tom asked.

Gaspar shrugged. “You know the dance so well I’m sure you can time it without the piano.”

“Yeah, okay, Gaspar,” Harry said when it looked like Tom was about to argue, smiling at him, “you go back, it’s fine. We won’t be long anyway.”

“Cheers,” Gaspar said, looking relieved. “I’ll see you tomorrow, okay? Don’t kill yourselves with practising, the dance is perfect.”

Tom waved him off, still catching his breath.

Harry watched Gaspar leave the theatre, leaving behind nothing but the silence of the large room as the big weighty doors closed. There was a single light shining on the stage, casting them in a golden glow. The only sounds that could be heard were their footsteps on the wooden stage whenever they shuffled about, and their heavy breathing.

“And then there were two,” Harry said, laughing lightly as he looked over at Tom. He was wearing his second costume, the one consisting of just simple slacks, a flowy black shirt, and his rings. He was barefoot, as they’d decided to do the dance like that. He looked beautiful, with his flushed cheeks and parted lips.

Harry was wearing his costume too, leaving only his face bare of makeup. The sound of the bracelets on his ankles jangling whenever he moved his feet was loud in the silent theatre.

Tom hummed, smiling. “Just one more?” he asked.

“I think so,” Harry agreed. “It is getting a bit late. Plus, we’ve been in here for, like, eight hours. ”

“Okay, let’s go then,” Tom said, his voice barely above a whisper but loud in the silence.

They went backstage, and Harry shook himself a bit, stretching his shoulders before nodding Tom’s way. Tom gave him a smile, and Harry took off.

He ran onto the stage, the charms on the ankle bracelets making a lot of noise. He laughed, looking over his shoulder just as Tom caught up to him in the centre of the stage.

Tom’s arms wrapped around his waist, hauling him close. He nosed at the column of Harry’s throat from behind, his lips catching on the skin there. Harry’s breath hitched—usually it went unnoticed with the piano playing, but there, in the silence, it was loud—and he arched his back, reaching up behind him, a hand passing through Tom’s hair as he closed his eyes.

Tom grasped his hand resting at his hip, letting the moment linger for a moment, before spinning him out. He pulled him back almost immediately, and they landed chest to chest, their breath mingling as they paused. Their lips were a hair’s breadth apart, and the way Tom swallowed was loud, his eyes wide as he looked into Harry’s.

For a moment, Harry thought they might kiss, but Tom got a firm grasp on his lower back and dipped him back. He arched effortlessly, trusting Tom to keep him steady. Their bodies were entirely pressed together, almost indistinguishable if it wasn’t for the difference in colour of their clothes. Tom’s hands splayed up along his ribs, making him shiver.

Harry wrapped his arms around his shoulders and pulled himself up, until they were both upright again—still *too close*. Harry could barely breathe, his body only functioning because of its intimate knowledge of the dance.

Tom picked him up easily, and Harry had to bite his lip as one of his legs wrapped around his waist while Tom held the other out, spinning them a couple times, making use of the space onstage. Tom's fingers dug into his hip, his arm wrapped all the way around his waist, and it took everything for Harry not to *moan* at the feel of it. The charms on the bracelet sounded out, and it was *loud* in the empty theatre, almost deafening in the way the sound of it rang in his ears.

Tom put him down and Harry took a step back, only one of his hands remaining on Tom's neck as he walked around him, his steps carefully quiet, their eyes locked together as Tom turned on himself, as if Harry drew him in like gravity.

Tom got a grip on his arm and pulled him forward, until they were flush together. His gaze was so intense, and Harry was glad for the reprieve of getting to tilt his chin back as his back arched under his hands, so that Tom could run his nose along his throat.

Tom pushed him away quickly, and even if Harry hadn't stumbled in weeks, he almost did. But he stayed in character, falling onto the floor, his legs spreading and a smirk pulling at his lips. It was an invitation, one he had perfected, and Tom looked *hungry* as he dropped to his knees, crawling between Harry's spread ones.

His breath hitched, and he stared up at Tom hovering over him for a second too long, his lips parting. He managed to hook a leg around his waist though, effectively flipping them over so Tom was lying on his back, and Harry was perched in his lap.

He smirked down at him, walking his fingers up his chest.

Tom's eyes were dark in the dim light of the theatre, and his jaw was clenched. He sat up, seating Harry properly on his lap, and wrapped his arms around his waist, holding him close before pushing him back onto the floor.

He was quick to get up, taking Harry's hand to pull him up too. The pace grew, and Tom danced him around the stage, pushing and pulling and spinning and picking him up, all in quick succession. It was the climax of the dance, and when Tom had spun him three times fast, the charms on the bracelets sounding out in a way that Harry had perfected, he pulled him back into him.

They stood there, on the very right side of the stage, their chests heaving together, the only sound in the theatre that of their heavy breathing.

They looked into each other's eyes, their lips almost brushing. Harry felt his heart stop, his breath catching as he saw Tom glance down to his lips. His eyes flicked back up to Harry's before going back down, and then he was leaning in.

Harry gasped—and he wasn't sure if that was what deterred Tom, but he didn't kiss him, like he'd clearly had every intention of doing. Instead, he placed a lingering kiss on his cheek, at

the very corner of his mouth.

When he pulled away, he let him go, and Harry had barely enough sense to remember to pretend to fall back, offstage, but he did. He stumbled horrendously, feeling dizzy.

They were quiet for a moment, save for their heavy breathing, Tom still in the spotlight of the stage, Harry in the shadows. They couldn't look at each other.

There was no kiss scripted at the end of the dance.

"I think—er," Tom wiped at the corner of his mouth with his thumb, and Harry swallowed as he tracked the motion. "I think that's enough—for tonight," he said, eyes shifty as they looked to and from Harry, "shall we go get changed?"

Harry nodded, humming. He was incapable of talking. He followed Tom to the dressing rooms mechanically. Their bags were sitting next to each other, and while they were in the habit of getting changed next to each other, right then it felt like they were too close. The air between them was suffocating, and Harry wasn't sure he'd taken a proper breath in over ten minutes.

He took all his jewellery off automatically, quickly, efficiently. He took the dress off, hanging it up on the hanger, trying desperately to not pay attention to how Tom slid the shirt off his shoulders. It was dead silent in the room, nothing but their movements making sound, fabric rubbing together.

Just as Harry had attached the chain back around his bare waist, he bumped into Tom who was in the process of unbuttoning his trousers. He put a hand out to steady them, his hand landing on Tom's bare stomach.

Harry swallowed, breathing shallow as he looked up. Tom's eyes were wide, his lips parted—he was staring at Harry with a mix of fear and, unmistakably, unbridled *want*.

Harry almost took a staggering step back, but Tom took a step forward before he could move.

It lasted an eternity, it was only a second, it felt like a century—Harry's hand moved up a bit, Tom leant down, Harry stood up on his tiptoes.

"Harry," Tom murmured, his voice barely audible, and Harry didn't know if it was a warning but there was no way he was heeding it.

He didn't know who closed the distance, but in the next second, they were kissing.

Harry's eyes fluttered shut, their lips touching only the barest amount, a brush, a tease. Tom's breath caught, a small noise coming from his throat, and then he was crowding Harry up into the wall.

It felt like a breath of fresh air, and he could do nothing about the whine that tore itself from his throat as Tom pressed him into the wall, kissing him with a hunger that Harry felt in his bones and recognised intimately—*starvation*.

His hands were in Tom's hair, pulling roughly as he plastered himself to his body that was crowding him in. Their teeth clashed with how desperately they were pressing into each other, and when Tom's tongue dipped past his parted lips, Harry *moaned*.

He fell back against the wall, his head hitting it a bit hard, but Tom only followed, letting out a small moan of his own as he explored Harry's mouth with his tongue, his hands grabbing and exploring along his back, his chest, his ribs, his waist.

Harry was so overwhelmed, but he couldn't pass up the opportunity—he kissed Tom just as desperately as he was being kissed, arching up into him, too desperate to let go.

It was like everything had been leading up to this moment, his ears were buzzing, and he was starting to feel dizzy with it.

Tom pulled back, his hands coming up to hold Harry's face in his hands, his eyes roaming over him obsessively, wildly. His cheeks were beyond flushed, his pupils blown wide. His lips were swollen and kiss-bitten.

Harry remembered he needed to breathe, and took in a big lungful of air, a small noise escaping his lips as he let it out.

Tom leant back in, pressing open mouthed kisses to his lips, holding him impossibly closer. His kisses drifted to the corner of Harry's mouth, to his cheek, to his jaw—like a starving man feasting on anything he could get his teeth in.

"Fuck, Tom," Harry moaned as he leant his head back against the wall, eyes closing, fingers flexing in his hair.

Tom's face was in the crook of his neck, his breathing ragged, but he pulled back, his hold on Harry loosening.

When Harry opened his eyes and looked at him, there was no longer only lust in his eyes, but panic, too. Harry's fingers flexed, loosening, as he swallowed.

Tom stared at him, his breathing impossibly heavy. "Harry," he said feebly, swallowing as the panic grew in his eyes, "I can't—can't do this."

Harry blinked slowly, his thumb rubbing the space just below Tom's ear. "What?" he said dazedly.

Tom took a step back, his hands leaving Harry altogether, making him shiver as the cold of the room hit him all at once. He looked away, wiping a hand over his mouth. "I can't do this," he repeated, voice cracking.

Awareness came back to Harry like a train crashing into him and he sucked in a breath, his eyes going wide where they had previously been half lidded. "What? Why?" he said, trying to catch his breath. He stared at Tom who was pointedly not looking at him. "Shit," he said, his own sense of panic setting in, dread pooling low in his stomach. "Shit," he repeated, almost reaching out but catching himself. "Did you not want it? I'm so sorry—"

“No, no,” Tom said, shaking his head. He swallowed, and it looked almost painful. “No, I—” he looked at Harry but looked away quickly. “I want it,” he admitted on a breath, “I *really* want it—want *you*.”

“Then,” Harry said, his voice hoarse, frowning in open confusion, “what’s the problem?”

“I can’t—” Tom shook his head, rubbing the heel of his hand into his eye. “I can’t get distracted now, I—I’ve worked too hard to get distracted now,” he said, a certain resolution in his voice that was at odds with how shaky it came out.

Harry blinked, and slumped back against the wall. His ears were buzzing again, but not in a good way. Mechanically, he took the step towards his bag and pulled his clothes out, putting them back on as he tried to make sense of the situation, his mind refusing to believe that this was happening.

“And that’s—that’s what I’d be? A distraction?” He swallowed, turning back to Tom who hadn’t moved, who was just watching him. “From what’s really important, right?”

“Right,” Tom said, his eyes wide with a million things that Harry couldn’t decipher, too distracted by the way that single word cracked his heart in two.

He took a deep breath, feeling a sob lodge itself somewhere in his chest, constricting his airway. He hoisted his bag onto his shoulder, diverting his eyes from Tom. “I’m not—” he cleared his throat, trying to chase away the hurt in his voice— “I’m not worth it, is what you’re saying.” His voice was flat, masking how utterly *distraught* he was.

“Harry—” Tom tried, sounding genuinely apologetic.

“No, it’s fine,” Harry cut in, ducking his head as he shouldered past him. “I understand,” he added quietly as he left the room, gritting his teeth together to stop himself from bawling.

— Scene eleven —

The walk back to the chapel passed in a blur that Harry could barely remember. He was trying so desperately to not cry, his mind replaying the feel of the kiss, and Tom's words—his mind couldn't reconcile the two things, they had no business happening at the same time. It didn't make sense, and Harry felt *stupid*.

He opened the chapel door with a bang, his muscles wound tight as he fought back the tidal wave of emotion battling to claw its way out of his chest.

"Harry!" Theo exclaimed, grinning over at him. Harry stopped short, feeling like a deer caught in headlights as he stared at Theo whose smile fell. "Where's—where's Tom?" he asked carefully.

Alphard turned in his seat, a frown etching across his forehead as he looked at him. "Harry, are you alright?"

He nodded, sniffing heavily in an effort to ward off the tears prickling at the corner of his eyes. "Tom—" his voice cracked, and he squeezed his eyes shut— "he should be here soon," he managed to say, breath catching against a sob he repressed. He opened his eyes again, looking at Alphard, awfully aware of how pathetic he looked fighting back tears. "Can I stay in your room tonight?" he asked in a hushed whisper, trying to hide how his voice had grown in pitch, cracking in the middle. His lip was wobbling, and he bit it to try and keep his composure.

"Oh God," Theo said, standing up, his eyes wide, "what's happened?"

Harry shook his head, shying away from Theo. "I just want to go to bed," he said weakly, two stray tears falling from his eyes.

"Oh my god, yes, Harry, come on," Alphard said quickly, rushing over and taking Harry's bag from him. "Theo leave it for now," he said sternly.

Harry followed Alphard up the stairs mindlessly, holding onto his arm like a little kid.

"What's he done?" he heard Theo say to whoever else must have been at the table—Harry hadn't paid much attention to the state of the room.

"Okay, come on," Alphard said gently, closing the door to his room behind Harry. "I'll put some sheets on the bed, okay?"

Harry nodded, biting his lip as hot tears started dripping down his cheeks. It was as he watched Alphard put the sheet on the bed, that was once Harry's, that the sob that had been wedged in his throat broke free; wet, and loud, and so pathetic, but far more distraught. It held in it all the hurt, all the heartbreak, all the *love* that he had in him.

Alphard turned around at once, his face crumbling as he came over and wrapped his arms around him without hesitation. "You're okay, Harry," he murmured, stroking his hair, guiding

his face into the crook of his neck.

Harry's hands, that had been hanging limply at his sides, grasped onto Alphard's shirt in a white knuckled grip, and he sobbed into his shoulder. His tears fell fast and heavy, burning a path down his cheeks, pooling into Alphard's neck. His sobs were loud in the room, and he couldn't quite breathe properly.

Everything hurt, a heartbreak so gut-wrenching it clogged up his throat, poisoning his bloodstream.

"Come on Harry, I've got you," Alphard said, moving them until they were sitting on his bed. It was a good thing he did, because Harry was sure his knees would've buckled.

Harry curled up into him, desperately needing to feel someone against him, to know the comfort of another person. It was an intrinsic need, to feel someone's warmth, their beating heart, their comforting embrace. He cried harder when Alphard's arms closed in around him, holding him tight.

It was safe, to break down here.

"You've been keeping too much to yourself, Harry," Alphard murmured, resting his chin on his head as he passed a gentle hand through his hair. "It's not healthy to keep things buried," he said, his voice a comforting rumble against Harry's chest, "look how it all builds up."

Harry was vaguely aware of the door opening, the light from the hallway pouring into the dimly lit room for a second, before it was closed again.

"It's Theo," Alphard informed him quietly. "It's okay." He rubbed a hand down his back, keeping him tucked up against him.

"Oh god," Theo whispered, the bed dipping as he sat down, draping himself over Harry's back in a hug that made Harry sob. "What has that idiot done to you?"

They were quiet for a few long minutes, Harry sandwiched between the both of them as he cried his heart out. He was so grateful for their comforting presence, unsure of how he would've dealt with such a hurt on his own. He wanted Hermione, he wanted Ron, and Sirius, and Remus, and his *parents*—but he was *so* happy to have his friends.

When his sobs quietened, the shaking of his shoulders slowed, his teeth stopped chattering, and he grew conscious of the snot dripping from his nose onto Alphard, he sniffed heavily and sat back a bit, forcing Theo to shuffle back and straighten out.

"D'you have some tissues?" was the first thing he said, his voice coming out all wobbly and stuffy.

Theo cleared his throat, huffing out a laugh as he leaned over to the nightstand to grab the box of tissues. "Don't ask why Alphard's got tissues on his bedside table," he said, his voice a bit emotional despite the humour in it.

Harry gave him a quick smile, taking the tissues gratefully and blowing his nose.

“Here,” Alphard said once he’d finished with his nose, reaching out and wiping the tear tracks from his face. “Are you feeling a bit better?”

Harry nodded, though he had to bite into his lip to stop from bursting out into tears again.

“What happened?” Theo asked quietly, draping himself over Harry’s shoulder. He brushed some of the hair sticking to Harry’s temples out of the way, giving him an encouraging smile.

Harry looked down at the tissue in his hand, the words struggling to leave his tongue. “We kissed,” he said, a mute whisper followed by a stifled sob.

There was no particular reaction from Theo or Alphard, and he was grateful for it, they just wrapped their arms tighter around his shoulders.

It gave Harry what he needed to go on, so he took a shuddering breath, and sniffed again. “We kissed,” he repeated, licking over his too dry lips, as if trying to imitate how utterly *electric* it had felt to kiss Tom, “and then, we stopped.” He cleared his throat, squeezing his eyes shut. Immediately, all he could see was Tom crowding him up against the wall, the exact same desire Harry felt thrumming through his veins reflected in his eyes—and for a moment, everything was okay. The next second, though, all he could see was Tom’s panicked look, his resolute, ‘*right*.’

He swallowed, trying to chase away the memory. “Tom stopped,” he said quietly, tearing the piece of tissue in his hand. “He said he couldn’t do it—” he took another deep, shuddering breath— “that I would be a distraction—from what was really important to him.”

“Fucking hell,” Theo murmured, shuffling closer to him, as if trying to protect him from the hurt.

Alphard sighed, leaning his head against Harry’s. “He broke your fucking heart, didn’t he?” he said quietly.

Harry nodded, a small sob wracking through his chest.

“You love him,” Alphard whispered. It wasn’t a question, but Harry nodded anyway. “You’re in love with him,” Alphard said, and Harry nodded again. “I’m so sorry, Harry,” he said, sounding so genuine, Harry melted into his side.

He felt so drained, as if someone had scraped out the last dregs of his very being. His heart was shattered to pieces, and his chest rang hollow.

“Harry,” Theo whispered, picking up Harry’s hand in his, lacing their fingers together absentmindedly, “I know you don’t want to hear this, and I don’t really want to say it, because I’m very angry at him right now—but he loves you. I think he’s just really out of his depth, but there’s not a world where he doesn’t love you, I don’t think.”

Harry smiled, a bittersweet sort of thing, and Theo looked taken aback by the sight of it. “Not enough,” he whispered, a fresh round of tears dripping silently from his eyes.

Theo’s face fell, and he curled back up into Harry’s side, holding his hand firmly.

There was sound out in the hallway, footsteps that Harry would recognise anywhere as Tom's, by sound alone. That's how well he knew him, how much attention he paid to him. A knock on Alphard's door followed not long after.

"Who is it?" Theo asked. And it shook Harry that Tom's best friend couldn't recognize his footsteps.

It was quiet, only a shuffling of feet could be heard. "It's me," came the soft response, followed by a cough.

Theo grumbled something and got up, opening the door a crack. "Absolutely not," he said immediately, and Harry was surprised with how waspish his voice was, a complete change from the soft tones he'd spoken in.

"Theo, not now," Tom said, sounding defeated. "I just want to see Harry, please."

Harry's heart lurched back to life for a moment, before shattering to the floor. When Theo turned around to get his approval, he shook his head.

"He doesn't want to," Theo said simply, "and I don't fucking blame him."

"Just—"

Theo didn't let Tom finish, stepping out of Alphard's room and shutting the door behind him. It sounded like they went into Tom's room, and Harry listened for any other sound. He didn't have to wait long.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Theo asked, his voice muted by the wall but still loud.

If Tom replied, it couldn't be heard through the wall.

"You led him on, for *months*, do you realise that?" Theo asked, and Harry cringed, curling into Alphard a bit more. "You wrote the fucking play all because you wanted him so much, and now what? He's not worth it?"

"I didn't—"

"You are such a *twat*!" Theo shouted. "Do you have any fucking idea in what state he was in? You have fancied him since Halloween, and don't you dare fucking deny it! And you *still* can't admit it to yourself! For fuck's sake Tom, piece of advice, get *over* yourself, seriously."

"You shouldn't have to listen to this," Alphard said, pulling away from Harry. "I'll be back in a minute," he assured with a kind smile, before leaving the room.

Harry could do nothing but wrap his arms around his knees, feeling numb.

"Oi!" Alphard said as he got to the next room over. "Shut the fuck up. Take this elsewhere or shut up."

“Alphard, tell him that I’m sorry,” Tom said, and Harry almost missed it for how quiet he was compared to the other two.

“Tell him yourself,” Alphard replied, and Harry had never heard so much contempt in his voice when talking to Tom, “when he wants to hear it. Go to your room, Theo.”

“I want to sleep with Harry,” Theo said petulantly.

“Absolutely not,” Tom said, his voice almost heated. Harry wrapped his arms tighter around his knees.

“Oh, I think—”

“Theo shut up,” Alphard snapped. “Just go to fucking bed, it’s late enough. You too, Tom, just go to bed.”

There was some grumbling, but from what Harry could hear, everyone retreated to their own rooms. He wiped away the stray tears dripping down his chin as Alphard came back into the room.

“Thank you, Alphie,” he mumbled, accepting the arm Alphard held out for him as he sat down, shuffling under it.

“Do you want me to make you some tea, maybe?” he asked, planting a small kiss on Harry’s temple. “Or do you just want to go to bed?”

“Bed, I reckon,” Harry said, clearing his throat as another tear fell down to join the others forming a puddle in his collarbone.

Alphard hummed, holding him a bit tighter. “I’m really sorry, Harry,” he said after a while. “You deserve someone who will love you and think that you’re the most important thing in the world.” Harry took a shaky breath, blinking quickly. “If it makes you feel any better,” he whispered conspiratorially, jostling Harry’s shoulder a bit, “Tom looked really upset.”

Harry huffed out a laugh, but it turned into a sob halfway through—it was all around a very pathetic sound to make. Alphard just held him tighter, shushing him softly while his tears continued to drip steadily from his eyes, a never ending stream of heartbreak.

*

They ended up going to bed some time later, after Alphard tucked Harry in and planted a small kiss on his forehead. It made Harry smile, though it also elicited a couple tears.

Harry knew when Alphard fell asleep from their months of sharing a room; he’d turn over a few times, start out on his back, turn to face the wall, then the room, and then the wall again, then his breathing would even out, he’d twitch a couple times, and he’d be fast asleep. It took a while, but eventually Alphard got through his routine and was soon asleep.

Harry wasn’t. He focused on the noise Alphard made as he fell asleep, but once he was out, Harry had nothing to do but to turn inward. The hurt in his chest was like an open wound,

bleeding sluggishly, his heart rate slowing to keep up with the blood loss. One shaky breath later and he was crying into his pillow.

He thought he might cry himself to sleep, but Morpheus was being stubborn, refusing to come and collect him. He laid there for a long time, long enough for his tears to dry out, and for the ghost of Tom's touch to appear.

He closed his eyes and relived the scene; the way Tom had held onto him, the desperation with which he'd kissed him, the look of pure desire on his face when they'd pulled back that first time before diving right back in. It had been so perfect—why did Tom have to ruin it?

He turned onto his side, burying his face into the pillow.

As the needles on the clock continued to turn, he started to regret it. It had been an impulsive action, but it had been a mutual one. He remembered Tom's murmured '*Harry*' before they'd kissed, and found himself wishing he'd heeded the implicit warning.

A kiss was not worth *this*—was it? It couldn't be, and yet Harry couldn't let go of the memory.

He couldn't let go of Tom. He *missed* him, quite acutely. He had nothing of him in this room —no t-shirt, no jumper, nothing. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept without *something* of Tom in his bed, and that was without trying to recall the last time he'd actually slept without *Tom* himself in his bed.

Harry was heartbroken, yes, but he still *loved* him—he still *needed* him. And he knew that he wouldn't be able to sleep without *something*.

Maybe, unconsciously, he knew what he was doing. But as he padded out of Alphard's room, hesitating only a moment before opening Tom's door, he was quite sure he was only going back for a jumper.

"Harry, is that you?" was the first thing Tom said once Harry had the door closed behind him. He'd been so careful to click it shut as quietly as he could, his footsteps inaudible in the quiet.

He froze where he'd been opening his wardrobe. "I'll be out in a second," he whispered back, his heart hammering against his ribcage. For all the thinking he'd done for the past few hours, not once had he thought about what he wanted to say to Tom.

"No, no," Tom said, and Harry could hear him getting out of bed. He appeared in front of him, illuminated only by the moonlight—they never shut the blinds, it was an implicit thing between them as neither of them minded the light in the morning—and Harry froze all over again. "Are you okay?" Tom asked, his eyes wide, achingly gentle.

Harry felt self-conscious, he felt *ashamed*. He nodded quickly, desperately wishing he could take back everything that had happened earlier on. He could only hope Tom hadn't heard him sobbing his heart out. "M'fine."

“I’m really sorry,” Tom said, face open and vulnerable in a way it rarely was.

Harry had to look away, which led to his eyes dropping down to Tom’s chest, realising he never would have found the jumper Tom had gifted to him, because he was already wearing it. Harry’s heart sped up again, and he looked up, incapable of looking at the jumper any more than he could look at Tom’s face.

“Don’t grovel,” he said, the words flying off his tongue with a volatility he could not control.

There was a beat of silence, and then Tom said, “What?”

Harry cleared his throat, deciding to just commit. “Don’t grovel, it doesn’t suit you.” His voice was quiet, defeated.

“I’m not grovelling,” Tom said, and he had the audacity to sound offended.

Harry cocked an unconvinced eyebrow at him before a small huff of laughter escaped him, completely driven by the absurdity of the situation and the lack of sleep.

The laugh seemed to make Tom less tense, and his shoulders dropped, a small smile etching itself onto his own lips—lips that Harry had kissed only a few hours prior—

He stopped that train of thought as quickly as he could, looking away from Tom and clearing his throat awkwardly.

“Stay,” Tom said, reaching out tentatively and holding onto his wrist, “please. I feel—awful about how we left things.”

Harry took a steadying breath and nodded, trying to ignore how Tom seemed to light up as he tugged him over to his bed. He didn’t lie down like Harry half expected him to, he just sat on the edge, gesturing for Harry to do the same.

He did, trying to avoid looking at him by staring straight ahead. He was still so *beautiful*, even in the wake of such destruction, he stood out as the most gorgeous thing Harry had ever seen. There, all bundled up in *their* jumper, the moonlight shining on him, Harry had never been so in love with him.

“I’m really sorry,” Tom said, sounding sincere, his voice nothing more than a murmur. “I was very understandably not in my right mind, and I never meant to insinuate that you were not worth my time, or whatever it is it came across as. I just—what I meant to say was that I couldn’t do that to you. I couldn’t string you along for however long, promising you something as shallow as ‘*the right time*’ when I’ve no idea when that’ll be.”

Harry huffed out a laugh and forced a smile, just to avoid the sob stuck in his throat breaking free. He still didn’t look at Tom. “You can have more than one thing, you know,” he whispered slowly.

“I can’t promise that I’d treat you right though,” Tom said, and Harry knew he was desperately trying to catch his eye, but Harry couldn’t. “Not without jeopardising my career.”

“That’s bullshit,” Harry whispered, biting at his bottom lip nervously.

“What?”

Harry turned to look at him, feeling his eyes go glassy with unshed tears. “That’s bullshit. You’ve been the best boyfriend I’ve ever had, and you’re not even my boyfriend.” He laughed, but it was devoid of humour.

A beat of stunned silence. Then: “Oh, er—”

“Sorry,” Harry said quickly, shaking his head as he leant forward to press the heel of his right hand in his eye. “I’m really tired, and I don’t really know what I want to say. I’m sorry; for putting us in this situation—it’s really awkward.”

Tom’s hand found his on the bedsheet, lacing their little fingers together. “I value you, and your friendship, more than most things in my life,” Tom said quietly. “I am very attracted to you, and I don’t think I’m wrong in assuming it’s mutual—” Harry blushed into the roots of his hair, feeling the tendrils of *shame* tugging at him again— “but I’m quite unwilling to let that affect the most significant relationship in my life.”

“Okay,” Harry said after a beat of silence, trying to keep his tears at bay. He took a deep breath and turned to Tom, burying everything so deep within him he could barely feel it in a well practised motion. *I’m in love with you*, is what he wanted to say. What he said was, “I feel the same way, your friendship means a lot to me,” and the words tasted bitter in his mouth.

Tom squeezed his finger in his and smiled. “Good.”

There was so much left unsaid, so much hurt between them. Harry wanted to scream, he wanted to cry, he wanted to make Tom *see* exactly how much he meant to him, wanted him to *feel* the devastating heartbreak ripping the remains of Harry’s heart to shreds.

What he said was, “I want to go to bed,” in the most monotone tone of voice he’d ever heard come out of himself.

“Sleep with me?” Tom asked, with a saccharine smile, and Harry wondered, just for a moment, if Tom was doing this on purpose, if he was *trying* to hurt him. “I couldn’t sleep—without you in the room.” And the way he said it—almost bashful—made Harry’s resolve shatter to the ground.

“Okay,” he said feebly, because he did not have the willpower at that moment to fight it. He’d indulge for a moment longer.

They laid down together, Tom pulling the quilt over them, and Harry into his arms. He was tucked up against Tom’s chest, his fingers scrunching up their jumper.

Tom fell asleep quickly. Harry fell asleep with tears still silently leaking out of his eyes.

*

When he woke up it was early, and he was still in Tom's arms. For a small moment, everything was fine, everything was as it should have been. There was no kiss, there was no hollow cavity in his chest.

But there was, and it carved itself out again in the early morning sunlight.

He breathed in deep, taking comfort in Tom's arms for the last time. He was dead asleep, looking as ethereal as he always did in the soft glow of the sunrise.

In his desire to lessen his hurt, if only for just a moment, Harry reached up and kissed him—it was the ghost of a touch, a brush of lips, though it lingered. When he'd allowed himself that, he carefully extricated himself from Tom's hold and got up.

When he got to the door he turned around and looked at him, just for a second, just to drink him in.

He forced his mind to quiet down as he went to the kitchen, covering the layer of screaming and crying with a blank canvas of faux-peace. He just leant against the counter, staring out of the window.

"You okay?"Alphard asked, having appeared behind him however long later.

Harry turned slowly, pressing his lips together as he shook his head.

"Come here," Alphard said, making his way over with his arms held out wide.

Harry fell into him, taking steady breath after steady breath, willing the gut-wrenching heartache to just lessen, if only for a moment.

"You need boundaries, Harry, or you're not gonna get over him," Alphard said softly, tucking some hair behind Harry's ear as they leant against the counter together. "No more sleeping in the same bed, no more cuddling. It's not fair, for you. And I think he's a right dickhead for taking advantage of that."

Harry smiled weakly, leaning forward until his forehead hit Alphard's chest with a dull thud. Alphard's hand went to his nape, his thumb circling the skin there in a soothing motion. "I know," he whispered. He took a breath, straightening back out. "I know," he repeated, wiping his nose on his hand with a sniff. "Thank you, really."

"No problem," Alphard said with a kind smile. "Come on, let's make some coffee."

— Scene twelve —

A whole week passed after the incident.

The Saturday morning, when the wounds were still fresh and Harry could still feel Tom's hands on him, was weird, to say the least. Harry and Alphard remained alone for a long time, until Theo emerged, draping himself over Harry and fussing over him. The other boys, save for Tom, emerged not long after and tentatively asked if everything was okay.

Tom had appeared some time later, and said, "You were up early this morning," to Harry. The other boys had seemed at a loss for words, all glancing at each other while sending disbelieving frowns Tom's way.

Harry's stomach had dropped, something a bit like despair crawling through him. It was clear that Tom had every intention to skip over what had happened, that it hadn't bothered him that much. It hurt in a way Harry couldn't describe.

Tom kept up his casual friendliness throughout the week, trying to maintain the bond he and Harry had forged. He toned it down, maintaining a distance, though, when Harry flinched back from him a couple too many times. Despite his apparent obliviousness, he didn't press when Harry pointedly went to his own bed every night.

They didn't talk that much, and Harry would be lying if he said he wasn't actively avoiding Tom most of the time. The other boys remained awkward whenever they were both in the same room, unsure of how to tread with Tom acting as if nothing had happened, and Harry very clearly showing signs of being distraught over the whole thing. Theo was still furious, Alphard always tried to stay at Harry's side, Gaspar seemed quite sad about the whole thing, Abraxas often caught Harry staring off into space and always offered him a kind smile, and Rick just seemed confused by it all.

The only thing that hinted at Tom being affected was that he called off the rehearsals for the week. He used the pretext of letting the younger years get through their productions with it being their last week of rehearsals for their own plays, but Harry wasn't really buying it.

They went to see the fifth year play on Thursday evening, Theo sitting between Harry and Tom while also pointedly ignoring Tom; they hadn't spoken at all since their argument Friday night. On Friday evening they attended the sixth year play. They were both very good, but Harry had a bit of a soft spot for the fourth year play which they'd attended in April.

Harry, for his part, wasn't faring that well. He went through his days mechanically, carrying the weight of a hollowed out chest around with him. Most nights he fell asleep with tears leaking from his eyes; his back to Tom, facing the wall, curled up around his quilt in a pathetic mimic of Tom's comfort.

"*You're shutting down*," Hermione said through the phone. Harry used the time where Tom and Abraxas had gone to the shops Saturday morning to ring her. He'd explained the situation in hushed tones, biting back the wobble in his voice.

“I’m not shutting down ‘mione,” he replied quietly, scratching at his hair. He was sitting on the stairs, wrapped up in an old jumper. It was a grey rainy day, the air cold and damp, and it fit his mood to perfection.

“*You are, Harry*,” she pressed, though her voice was gentle. “*You sound exactly the same as last time you were depressed*.”

“I’m not depressed, Hermione,” he said, rolling his eyes as he picked at a loose thread on his jumper.

Harry wasn’t depressed, he was heartbroken. The level of moping was the same though.

“*You’re in denial then,”* she said. “*Actually, I think you both are. You’re in denial of how much this is actually hurting you, and Tom’s in denial about it happening at all. If you want my opinion, he definitely has feelings for you beyond attraction, he just doesn’t know what to do with them*.”

Harry hummed. He’d heard the same thing from Theo, but he didn’t see the point in acknowledging it—even if it was true, what did it change?

The door opened, the sound of the rain falling outside becoming loud for a moment before it quietened as the door closed.

“Tom and Abraxas just got back, ‘mione,” Harry said, clearing his throat.

“*Oh, I’ll let you go then, Harry*,” she said, sounding reluctant, “*but just—please don’t kill yourself over this. You’ve been dreaming about going to this school forever, don’t throw that away over a boy*.”

Harry shook his head, pressing his forehead into his knees. “I’m not going to kill myself, Hermione.”

“*I didn’t mean it literally*,” she said, and Harry knew she was rolling her eyes. “*But you better not!*”

Harry smiled. “I won’t.”

“*No but seriously, Harry, I know how much this is hurting you and I really wish I could be there for you. Just try and focus on what’s important for the moment, what makes you happy*.”

Harry winced, the answer to both of those things, for him, was Tom. It was a bitter reminder that the sentiment was not mutual.

“Yeah, okay,” he said, sighing. “I’ll drink some orange juice or something, get some vitamins.”

Hermione laughed, and Harry knew she was doing that thing where she held the phone up to her ear with both hands, as if she wanted to crawl through it, hold on tighter. “*You do that, Harry*.”

“Okay, bye ‘mione. Thanks for the chat, love you,” he said.

“*I love you too Harry, I’ll tell Ron you rang.*”

“Yeah, please do. Okay, bye.”

“*Bye bye*.”

He reached up from where he was sitting and hung up the phone with a sigh.

Tom appeared from the kitchen archway, and Harry tried not to tense up, wanting nothing more than to get up and leave. “We didn’t get any orange juice,” he said, tilting his head to the side with a perplexed sort of look.

Harry, despite it all, still found him endearing. “It’s fine,” he said flatly, instead of his usual jibe about how Tom was clearly listening in to his conversation.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, standing up, “I was just joking.” He walked past Tom, careful to not touch him as he went into the library, trying to get air into his lungs. He tried to ignore the flash of hurt on Tom’s face.

Alphard, Theo, and Rick were sitting around the table, playing a game of UNO. Gaspar was at the piano, playing on and off.

“How’s the lovely Hermione?” Theo asked, grinning up at him.

“She’s fine,” Harry said with a smile. “She’s just finishing up her exam period at the moment.”

“Still with Ron?” Theo asked, sending him a crooked smirk.

“Yes,” Harry laughed, smacking his arm lightly as he went past him.

“Just asking,” Theo said, raising his hands innocently.

Harry scoffed, looking over his shoulder at his cards. “He’s got a plus four,” he said, looking at Alphard and Rick who snickered while Theo exclaimed in betrayal.

Harry smiled lightly before heading over to the piano. It was such a lovely part of the library, a small, quieter nook, surrounded by books, overlooked by the stained glass. Rain was pouring down onto the glass, making it look like it was melting. Harry climbed onto the piano, returning Gaspar’s small smile.

Gaspar stopped playing, sighing as he rested his fingers on the keys. “Shitty day.”

Harry hummed, crossing his legs under himself. “What’re you playing?”

“Just messing about,” Gaspar said with a shrug. “I’m feeling uninspired as of late, and I don’t like it. Music usually helps.”

“Is it helping?”

“Not really,” Gaspar said dejectedly. “Sing for me?”

Harry groaned, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes after discarding his glasses to the side. “I don’t know what to sing, and I don’t really feel like it.”

“What about something you wrote?” Gaspar proposed. “You said you’re a lyricist last time.”

Harry snorted, slipping his glasses back onto his nose and sitting back on his hands. “The last time I wrote lyrics I was sixteen. It’s embarrassing.”

“What made you want to write at sixteen?” Gaspar asked softly.

“I was sad,” Harry said, looking out of the stained glass, remembering a semblance of a song he wrote.

“Well then it can’t be bad,” Gaspar said. “Do you remember it?”

“Not really,” Harry admitted. “But I think I’ve got the notebook here.”

“Go get it then,” Gaspar said encouragingly.

Harry sighed but went. He trudged up the stairs, grateful that his and Tom’s room was empty when he got there. He found the notebook easily, Tom having sorted his things when he’d moved in. When he got back downstairs he climbed back onto the piano, crossing his legs and opening the notebook in his lap.

“What do you want me to play?” Gaspar asked.

Harry shrugged, biting at his thumb as he read over the lyrics. “Something slow, on the lower side.”

“Okay.”

Gaspar started playing, finding his rhythm as he pressed the keys down. Harry listened intently, tapping out the melody onto the piano with his fingers.

When Gaspar looked at him for his approval, Harry nodded.

“Okay then,” Gaspar said, “I’ll play it again, start when you want.”

Harry nodded, biting into his lip as he stared at the lyrics. It was strange, seeing the reflection of his sixteen year old self in them. It was even stranger finding that they had a lot more in common than he remembered.

When the only sound that could be heard was the soft piano and the rain pattering against the window, Harry started.

Sun bleached flies sitting in the windowsill
Waiting for the day they escape
They talk all about their money and how their babies are always changing while they're breathing in the poison of the paint

Gaspar nodded, pressing into the keys a tad differently, shifting to match Harry's tone.

What I wouldn't give to be in Church this Sunday
Listening to the choir, so heartfelt, all singing
God loves you, but not enough to save you
So good luck taking care of yourself

"Oh my god," Theo said as he rounded the bookshelf to face the piano, Alphard and Rick in tow.

Harry swallowed, averting his eyes.

So I said fine, 'cause that's how my daddy raised me
If they strike once then you just hit 'em twice as hard
But in the end, if I bend under the weight that they gave me
Then this heart would break and fall as twice as far

"Rick, give me something," Gaspar said, picking up speed on the piano. Rick obliged, grabbing two hardback books, accompanying the piano with a beat.

We all know how it goes
The more it hurts, the less it shows
But I still feel like they all know, and that's why I can never go back home
And I spend my life watching it go by from the sidelines
And God, I've tried, but I think it's about time I put up a fight

"Alphard run and get your violin," Gaspar said urgently, never letting up on the piano. He really was a phenomenal musician. Harry smiled as he glanced out of the window. "For the bridge," he said as Alphard disappeared, looking up at Harry, "there's a bridge, right?" Harry nodded.

But I don't mind 'cause that's how my daddy raised me (How my daddy raised me)
If they strike once then you just hit 'em twice as hard
But I always knew that in the end no one was coming to save me
So I just prayed and I keep praying and praying and praying

"Alphie, now," Gaspar said, making a motion with his hand. Alphard started playing, the violin carrying into the bridge.

If it's meant to be then it will be
So I met him there and told him I believe

“Oh my god, *Harry*,” Theo said excitedly, climbing up onto the piano as well. He came in with backing vocals, making Harry smile.

Singing if it’s meant to be then it will be
I forgive it all as it comes back to me (Back to me)
If it's meant to be then it will be (Oh it will be)
So I met him there and told him I believe (I believe, yeah)
Singing if it's meant to be then it will be (Oh, oh)
I forgive it all as it comes back to me (It all comes back to me)
If it's meant to be then it will be (It will be, it will be, it will be)
So I met him there and told him I believe (Yeah)

Harry opened his eyes, leaning against Theo who was sitting at his back, singing very loudly into his ear. Tom was leaning against the bookshelf, staring at him with something akin to awe on his face, the soft light illuminating his cheek.

Singing if it's meant to be then it will be
And I forgive it all as it comes back to me (Oh)

Tom blinked, eyes wide. And Harry wondered, if, for just a moment, Tom saw through him—*saw him*.

Harry looked away, blinking quickly as Alphard stopped the violin at Gaspar’s cue, Rick doing the same. Harry’s voice didn’t carry as it had done, quiet as he almost spoke the words;

I'm still praying for that house in Nebraska
By the highway, out on the edge of town
Dancing with the windows open
I can't let go when something's broken
It's all I know and it's all I want now

Theo hummed along to the melody as Gaspar closed the song, rocking slowly with his eyes closed, an arm around Harry’s middle.

When the last note on the piano rang out, it was quiet.

“You wrote that at sixteen?” Gaspar asked, eyes wide as he looked up at Harry.

Harry nodded, clearing his throat. His face was flaming, embarrassed.

“Please tell me the Nebraska line is a reference to your mum’s song,” Gaspar said, staring up at him with stars in his eyes.

Harry nodded again. “She talked about it a lot,” he said quietly. “The house in Nebraska.”

“You are so talented,” Theo said dreamily.

Harry laughed, poking him. “It wouldn’t have been half as good without the instruments. You really are something else, Gaspar. How the fuck did you do that?”

Gaspar grinned up at him. “You gave me my inspiration back.”

Tom cleared his throat, capturing everyone’s attention.

“What do you want?” Theo asked tetchily.

Tom ignored him, his eyes refusing to leave Harry who shied away from his stare, looking out of the window. “I’ve decided what I want the play to be called,” he said, momentarily stunning the room.

“What?” Alphard said, removing the violin from his shoulder. “What have you decided on?”

Harry looked over at him, searching his face to find the answers he was looking for.

Tom just stared back, a small fond smile on his face as he said, “*Elio*.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay sorry ... truly sorry :/

- The plays mentioned in scene 3 are: *Love's Labour's Lost* by Shakespeare & Wilkins, *Pericles* by Shakespeare, and *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry.
- In Scene 7, the songs that are given to "the marauders" are *It's Not Living (If It's Not With You)* by the 1975, and *Teenagers* by My Chemical Romance. Both feature in that Scene's playlist linked in the beginning of chapter AN.
- And of course in Scene 12 the song Harry wrote was *Sun bleached flies* by Ethel Cain.

Again, I am Sorry. I mean it. Sorry. Hopefully the last Act being 80k words will make up for this :)

I would still love to know what you thought in the comments. And, again, thank you to everyone who has been reading, you're all so lovely and it's wonderful to see people enjoy this AU.

See you Tuesday for the Interlude (any guesses as to what it could be?) before the final Act will be posted next Friday. See you Tuesday xx

Chapter 5: Interlude

Chapter Notes

Okay here's the interlude, yes I wrote a whole entire original play for this fic, I hope you'll like it. It's only 8k so very short compared to usual uploads.

Here's the meanings of the character names:
Elio : the sun <3 (latin origin, italian & spanish)
Alarik : leader of all (Scandinavian origin)
Fidel : faithful (latin origin "Fidelis")
Alessandro : defender of the people (italian origin with greek connotation in the meaning)
Lamont : law man (norse origin)
Lennon : lover (Irish gaelic origin)
Delancey : creative and unique individual (french origin)

Happy reading xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ELIO

Characters

ALARIK, King of England
ELIO, Prince of Italy
FIDEL, Alarik's closest counsellor
LAMONT, one of Alarik's counsellors
ALESSANDRO, Elio's friend
LENNON, one of Alarik's counsellors
DELANCEY, poet, part of Alarik's Royal Court
A servant
Two guards
Various members of the English Royal Court

ACT I

Scene one

In a courtyard, in England.
Enter two women of the court.

LADY PRISCILLA: My dear, have you heard the news?

LADY ROSAMUND: Of the Prince of Italy? Of course.

LADY PRISCILLA: I hear the King is not happy for it.

LADY ROSAMUND: I hear the King of Italy forced his hand in the negotiations.

LADY PRISCILLA: Oh! King Alarik must be beside himself! And to have the King of Italy send his son, that is a slight that will not go amiss.

LADY ROSAMUND: I would not be surprised if war was declared in the coming days, what with King Alarik's temper…

LADY PRISCILLA: Perhaps if the King of Italy was sending a daughter things would not be so…

(they laugh)
Enter two young men.

MARCEL: Oh, Lady Priscilla and Lady Rosamund, how do you do?

WILLIAM: What has amused you so, my ladies?

LADY PRISCILLA: Oh! We do well, in fair shape, I do say. I hope the same goes for yourselves, young Lords.

LADY ROSAMUND: And do not pay mind to our gossiping, we cannot help ourselves.

MARCEL: Oh, but my Lady, you must know that young men such as ourselves are quite partial to a lick of gossip.

WILLIAM: The best of it always comes out of the mouths of lovely Ladies such as yourselves.

LADY PRISCILLA: Flattery! My, if you wish to know, we were discussing the company the King is to entertain come tomorrow.

MARCEL: The Prince of Italy?

WILLIAM: Oh, but Madam, you must know the tales! The whispers bouncing off the walls and through the plains that separate our Kingdoms?

LADY ROSAMUND: Whispers? Of what business do you speak? You must say!

MARCEL: It would appear the son is a mystery…

LADY PRISCILLA: Whatever do you mean?

WILLIAM: The King of Italy has daughters, of that we are sure. It would appear, however, that his son is unknown.

LADY PRISCILLA: Do you mean to say this mysterious Prince did not exist until the announcement of his arrival?

MARCEL: The King of Italy has kept him secret. And there are whispers surrounding the boy.

WILLIAM: I heard word from my cousin who visited the Royal Court of Italy. He only caught a glimpse of the boy, hidden amongst shadows, when he dared roam the castle at night.

MARCEL: It is said that he is more beautiful than any fair maiden, more enchanting than any wondrous sight.

WILLIAM: The King kept him hidden for this reason, for fear rival kingdoms would seek to steal him away.

LADY ROSAMUND: But why send him here?

LADY PRISCILLA: Perhaps he hopes our King will be taken with him, sealing their alliance with marriage.

MARCEL: Our thoughts reflect this. The negotiations that are to take place are on the King of Italy's terms, however, we cannot ignore how our King cornered his troops at the border before talk of a treaty spread.

LADY ROSAMUND: Perhaps he seeks to distract our King…

WILLIAM: Let us hope our King remains stoic in the face of flattery.

LADY PRISCILLA: He has been presented with every woman in the kingdom and has not succumbed to temptation but once! Some Lords even presented their sons, but the same fate found them. I would be highly surprised if he was wooed by an elusive Italian Prince.

LADY ROSAMUND: But if he is as beautiful as is claimed…

LADY PRISCILLA: Rose! I believe if anyone is susceptible to falling victim to someone's charm, it is rather the young Prince who should be worried! Do not underestimate our King, my dear, he is well in his own right.

LADY ROSAMUND: Oh, you know how charming I believe the King to be! I am rather worried they will find their match with one another, if the rumours of the young Prince's beauty are to be trusted.

LADY PRISCILLA: Perhaps a boy so beautiful would be too delicate for our King, he is not known for his delicacy.

LADY ROSAMUND: Perhaps the delicate Prince would like a firm hand…

LADY PRISCILLA: Rose!

(they all laugh)

MARCEL: My Ladies, let us treat you to tea in the grounds.

WILLIAM: Ah, and you will tell us all about the courtings amongst the young people, I am sure you are well informed!

Exeunt

Scene two

In a throne room in England.
Enter Alarik, Lamont, and Fidel.

FIDEL: My Lord, everything is in order for the arrival of the Prince of Italy tomorrow.

ALARIK: What a mockery! Why the King could not come himself… It is an affront to my person, a lack of respect, of regard. That he would send me his *son*, as if I am myself a mere Prince. I am King! The King of England, and I have done things the King of Italy could not dream of! It is a humiliation, demeaning—I have much better things to deal with, more important dealings than entertaining a *Prince*—

FIDEL: My Lord, perhaps the company will distract you for a time. Your quest to conquer is in its early stages, compromise is necessary. Entertain the Prince, and we will learn from this.

Enter Delancey and Lennon

LENNON: My Lord, you wished to see us?

ALARIK: Tomorrow the Prince of Italy is arriving, you will entertain him. I have no interest in how you do so, but you will keep him away from me. I do not trust the father and I have no desire to entertain the son.

DELANCEY: Of course, your Majesty. If I may ask, how long is the Prince to stay in our company?

FIDEL: A week, Delancey.

ALARIK: Lennon, Delancey, and Lamont, you will keep him distracted. You will show him the castle, the grounds, the court. I will not allow for this attempt at keeping me from what is important.

LAMONT: Of course, my Lord.

ALARIK: Leave us.

Exit Lennon, Delancey, and Lamont

FIDEL: Is there anything else you wish to discuss, Alarik?

ALARIK: Fidel, I am starting to believe you enjoy undermining me. You speak of compromise, and of keeping company, do you wish for me to grow a lazy King? Do you wish for me to be like my father? I was of the belief you shared in my ideas and ambition of being the greatest King England has ever seen.

FIDEL: Of course, my Lord. I would never seek to undermine, or otherwise minimise your power. You have achieved great things already, my friend. More than your father ever did, despite your young age. I simply worry. I would not wish for you to meet the same end.

ALARIK: For your own sake, I will pretend you did not utter those words. That you would even *insinuate* that I would be as foolish as my father, I cannot believe.

FIDEL: Pardon my misstep, my Lord. You know I did not mean it in such a way.

ALARIK: I should hope not. See to the messenger from France, we must play our cards better here than with Italy. You will tell me everything he relays.

FIDEL: Well, my Lord.

Exit Fidel

ALARIK: Politics—how boring. I did so hope becoming King would be less tedious. Is this all life is? Is this all life has to offer? Sacrificing my soldiers' lives to conquer distant lands to quell my boredom? I do suppose my divine position grants me such liberties—it is my right, after all, to seek fulfilment in this life. Conquering the world should surely grant me that. In the meantime, I must revise my strategy for the negotiations to come with Italy. I will not be humiliated by a *Prince*.

Exeunt

Scene three

Enter Lennon, Lamont, and Delancey

DELANCEY: What do they enjoy in Italy? Music? Art? Should my poetry or my playing be of liking to the Prince? I worry he will grow bored of it—and that it will reflect poorly on our King's hospitality.

LENNON: We would not want to cause issues in the negotiations, by being terrible hosts. Although, I doubt your poetry will be an issue, Delancey. I worry more for the entertainment —in that there is none, aside from your arts.

DELANCEY: Oh, our Lord is simply not a man for the arts.

LENNON: And that is troubling for the kingdom! A King should appreciate the arts for they reflect knowledge, and knowledge, for many, is power.

LAMONT: Lennon, do not insinuate our King lacks in power, you know that to be untrue.

LENNON: I would never speak ill of our Lord, Lamont! I simply worry of the image our kingdom holds in the eye of foreign visitors.

LAMONT: You would do well to articulate your reproaches in a way that does not implicate our King—he has killed for less.

LENNON: Certainly, he has.

DELANCEY: He would not kill me for boring the Prince? Would he?

LENNON: Do not be absurd, Delancey. Your arts are well.

LAMONT: I hear Italy has a grandiose appreciation for the arts. I am certain the Prince will be enamoured with you.

DELANCEY: Oh! You do flatter, dear Lamont. I think I shall compose something in his honour, perhaps that will endear him to our kingdom, and he will negotiate in our favour.

LENNON: I will speak to the courtiers, they should be ready to greet the Prince upon his arrival. We do not wish to seem hostile.

LAMONT: I will ensure the servants planned in accordance with the importance of our guest.

DELANCEY: Very well, my friends. Together we shall ensure our King emerges victorious from this meeting.

LENNON: We shall reconvene tonight.

LAMONT: Very well. Until tonight.

Exeunt

Curtain draws — End of Act I.

ACT II

Scene one

In the throne room.
Enter Alarik, Fidel, Lamont, and Delancey

LAMONT: The elders are uneasy at the prospect of tension with France.

FIDEL: France does not pose an immediate threat. We have grounds to believe they could yield.

ALARIK: You may tell the counsel to rest assured. The civil war has left the nation desolate, the King is not ready for war. We are mightier, we will win.

LAMONT: I will, my Lord. It is of the utmost importance we focus our attention on Italy, anyway.

FIDEL: Lennon has just intercepted our guest. I see them in the courtyard. Oh my…

ALARIK: What is it?

FIDEL: Nothing, my Lord. Nothing to worry about.

DELANCEY: Will the Prince be arriving shortly?

FIDEL: In the time it takes to walk from the courtyard to this very room.

DELANCEY: I shall play, then.

(he retreats to a corner of the room and plays the violin)

ALARIK: Does he have many companions with him?

FIDEL: Just one.

LAMONT: Unusual… perhaps this is not such a power play?

FIDEL: It could be a mockery, to insinuate this is not important—that more people are not needed.

ALARIK: We do not have time to ruminate on it. We shall see.

Enter Lennon

LENNON: My Lord! The Prince of Italy is here.

ALARIK: Bring him in.

Enter Elio and Alessandro
(Silence but for Elio's bracelets.)

ALESSANDRO: The Crown Prince of Italy, Elio.

ELIO: Your Majesty.

FIDEL: Your Majesty, welcome.

LAMONT: We hope your journey was not too arduous, your Majesty.

FIDEL: My Lord?

ALARIK: Elio—the Sun.

ELIO: Your Majesty.

ALARIK: Alarik, please.

ELIO: I am grateful for your hospitality, Alarik. My father sends his kind regards.

ALARIK: It is an honour to have you, Elio. Your journey went well, I presume.

ELIO: As well as can be hoped, despite its longevity.

ALARIK: You must rest then. We have a ball organised in your honour tonight, I am sure Lennon mentioned it.

LENNON: My Lord—of course, the ball. I must oversee the preparations of the event. Excuse me, your Majesties.

Exit Lennon

ELIO: You mustn't have, your Majesty.

ALARIK: Please, call me Alarik. And it is a pleasure and a privilege to host your grace.

ELIO: I was not informed the English were so well versed in flattery.

ALARIK: An oversight, I am sure. I would like you to meet my counsellors, Fidel and Lamont. You have already met Lennon. And there is Delancey, who I am certain will treat you to his most wondrous poetry.

ELIO: Poetry? You spoil me, Alarik. It is lovely to meet you all. I have brought along my friend, Alessandro, I hope it is not an issue.

ALARIK: Of course, you are both welcome. I will let you rest, so that you may acquaint yourself with the castle and recuperate from your travels before the ball. Delancey, would you escort his Majesty the Prince to his rooms?

DELANCEY: Of course, my Lord.

ALARIK: If you are in need of anything, please do not hesitate to call for me.

ELIO: Thank you, Alarik.

ALARIK: I will see you tonight, Elio.

ELIO: I look forward to it. Arrivederci, Alarik.

Exit Elio, Alessandro, and Delancey

FIDEL: Are you quite well, my Lord?

ALARIK: I am not certain, Fidel, though I fear I have never felt better.

LAMONT: My Lord?

ALARIK: Has the sun always shone so bright? Has the world always seemed so luminous? The sky always so blue? I do believe I thought everything to be quite grey, I feel like I have opened my eyes for the first time.

FIDEL: Oh, oh no.

LAMONT: My Lord, did you—did you enjoy meeting the Prince?

ALARIK: Did I enjoy it? Lamont, does one typically not enjoy wondrous events? Does one lay eyes upon an angel and refute its beauty? Scorn its arrival?

FIDEL: Was it wise to speak of a ball, my Lord? Such an event cannot be prepared in an afternoon.

ALARIK: It shall be prepared and ready for this evening. Threaten violence if you must, Fidel, but it shall be ready. And it shall be grand, fit for the Prince.

LAMONT: Of course, my Lord, we will have all the servants and courtiers lend a hand. The ballroom shall be ready for this evening. However, I must ask, is it still your wish that we occupy him during his visit?

ALARIK: Of course not! Lamont, I fear I might die if I do not see him again.

FIDEL: Oh, good Lord.

ALARIK: Fidel, do you remember my mother's locket?

FIDEL: Her heirloom? Of course, but why—

ALARIK: Would he not look divine in it?

FIDEL: The Prince?

ALARIK: Yes, Fidel, of course the Prince, who else? Elio would look phenomenal with my mother's locket wrapped around his throat. Have a servant send it to his rooms with a request

that he wear it tonight.

LAMONT: My Lord! Surely you do not plan on courting him? That is a traditional courting gift.

ALARIK: That is certainly an idea, is it not?

FIDEL: Alarik, I fear you are rushing into this—

ALARIK: Should I not? You have begged me to find company, have presented me with every woman in the kingdom and half of the men. Should you not be relieved that I have set my sights on someone? Beyond his enchanting nature, our union should resolve all conflict with Italy for the time being, and would ensure a strong ally!

FIDEL: Yes, but we still do not know why he is here! Why send his son instead of coming himself? The elusive son not a soul had heard of!

ALARIK: I understand now why he was kept hidden. The Nations would have been battling for his hand in an instant of his revelation to the world.

FIDEL: Exactly! Why should he send him here, now?

ALARIK: Perhaps the King wishes to seal ties with England? Perhaps his purpose was for me to wed his son?

FIDEL: I am suspicious, and if you would like my advice, you should be too.

LAMONT: If not suspicious, then wary, my Lord.

ALARIK: Have a servant send the locket, Fidel. Lamont, find Lennon and help him.

LAMONT: Yes, my Lord.

FIDEL: Alarik—

ALARIK: I must consult some documents on Royal weddings, I fear I never paid them much mind.

FIDEL: Alarik—

ALARIK: Now, Fidel.

FIDEL: Very well, as you so wish.

Exit Fidel and Lamont

ALARIK, *alone*: I cannot recall having such interest in another before this instant. I have never seeked to know more, to discover more, of someone. He is beautiful, that is an uncontested truth, but there is more; his eyes shone with a thousand secrets, a million stars, and countless mysteries, and I wish to unravel them all. His jewellery alone shines as the

blade of the sharpest of knives, and I have always been taken with cutting things. He holds a power I covet but that I cannot put my finger on—a power I wish to take, that I will take, if only he will allow me to. I will have it before the end of the night, of this I am certain.

Exeunt

Scene two

Enter Elio and Alessandro
In their rooms in the castle.

ALESSANDRO: Your father sent you to discuss politics, not to attend balls.

ELIO: You know what I think of politics, Alessandro, and I have told my father as much.

ALESSANDRO: You would rather seduce the King?

ELIO: It is no fault of mine the king wishes to throw a ball in my honour.

ALESSANDRO: You like him.

ELIO: We have barely met.

ALESSANDRO: But you like him.

ELIO: He is very fetching, is he not? Charming, too.

ALESSANDRO: Your father told me to keep an eye on you, to ward off your romantic nature.

ELIO: Oh? And how will you do that?

ALESSANDRO: I will not. I trust you.

ELIO: I was told he was young, and handsome, and yet I did not expect him.

ALESSANDRO: I hear he has never been taken with anyone.

ELIO: Do you think he will be taken with me?

ALESSANDRO: He looked smitten, Elio. When has anyone not been taken with you?

ELIO: You have not.

ALESSANDRO: You are my friend. I do not care for your looks.

ELIO: And my charming personality?

ALESSANDRO: Leaves to be desired.

(*they laugh*)

ALESSANDRO: Would you let him court you? I have never seen you quite so enchanted upon meeting someone.

ELIO: I think…I believe I would like to. But I have a duty to do.

ALESSANDRO: I thought you did not care for politics.

ELIO: I am no politician.

ALESSANDRO: Ah, *l'assassino*.

ELIO: My father would not have sent me if it were a simple matter of politics, Alessandro.

ALESSANDRO: *L'arma fatale, l'arma segreta*.

(*A knock on the door*)
Enter servant

SERVANT: Your Majesty, pardon my intrusion. The King sends a gift.

Exit servant
(Elio opens the box to reveal a locket)

ALESSANDRO: It would seem the seduction worked. If I am not mistaken that is a traditional courting gift, is it not? If it is an heirloom, as it appears to be.

(*Elio puts the locket on, placing the pendant above his heart.*
He looks in the mirror, his ankle bracelets sound out as he stares directly at the public.)

The curtain draws—End of Act II.

ACT III

Scene one

A ballroom full of courtiers.
Enter Alarik, Fidel, Lamont, Lennon, and Delancey

LENNON: I hope the event is to your liking, my Lord.

ALARIK: Fear not, Lennon, you seem to have outdone yourself. Let us hope Elio is of the same opinion.

LAMONT: I am certain he will find it opulent, my Lord.

FIDEL: Do you wish for the seat beside you to remain empty, Alarik? For the Prince?

ALARIK: Indeed, Fidel.

FIDEL: Very well.

DELANCEY: And for the friend? Alessandro?

ALARIK: The bodyguard? Seat him beside the Prince, if you must.

LAMONT: That would be wise, your Majesty. It would not do to offend a friend of your intended.

FIDEL: He is not—

ALARIK: You are correct, Lamont.

LENNON: Is that him, over there?

ALARIK: It is.

Enter Elio and Alessandro
(the music quietens)

ALARIK: Ladies and gentlemen of the court, I have the honour of presenting Elio, the Prince of Italy, to you.

(the courtiers applaud politely)

ELIO: Thank you. Such a warm welcome.

ALARIK: Have a seat, Elio.

ELIO: Beside yourself? How considerate.

ALARIK: I would have you nowhere else.

(*the music picks up again*)

ALARIK: I see you received my gift.

ELIO: It is beautiful. What is its history?

ALARIK: It was my mother's, though it looks much better on yourself.

ELIO: Do I detect flattery again?

ALARIK: It is sincere, I could never be anything but.

ELIO: You are very charming, I did not expect such a lovely welcome.

ALARIK: You deserve nothing less.

ELIO: I do so hope we will be able to come to a mutually beneficial decision concerning the negotiations.

ALARIK: I am more than certain we will find an agreeable arrangement. Though I cannot help but wonder if we already have. If I understand correctly, you accept my gift?

ELIO: It is difficult to refuse such an offer.

ALARIK: Is that what you wish? To refuse it?

ELIO: I am wearing your mother's heirloom, am I not? I am quite certain that means acceptance, if the customs in England are the same as they are in Italy.

FIDEL: My lord—

ALARIK: Wonderful. Could I interest you in some entertainment, Elio? Delancey is the finest poet in the kingdom.

ELIO: I would be delighted to hear it, Alarik.

ALARIK: What have you prepared for our esteemed guest, Delancey?

DELANCEY: My Lord, I thought to recount your triumph over the rebellion. The battle with Anwir, to be exact.

LENNON: Oh! How wonderful! We have been waiting for your piece on that particular event.

DELANCEY: Would you play me the violin, dear Lennon? This arrangement.

LENNON: It would be my pleasure.

ELIO: Anwir? I have never heard of him.

ALARIK: I am certain Delancey will paint the picture for you, my dear Elio.

(The orchestra stops playing. The courtiers gather around. Lennon starts playing the violin.)

DELANCEY:

A hush, a murmur, whispers in the air,
Within our midst, a liar did appear.
When King Alarik took his leave, he bred,
A venomous rebellion, filled with dread.

When Alarik did return this had brought strife,
With a rebellion threatening England's life;
Anwir, once trusted by the royal side,
Had now become a traitor in his pride.

Anwir's deceit had in the shadows grown
Into a man the King had never known.
In secret he schemed, in shadows did roam,
A rebellion born of treachery's loam.

As loyal knights with banners flowing high,
They rallied 'round their King with battle cry.
The kingdom's protection, with arms so bright,
For justice, for honour, they'd freely fight.

With swords and shields, they fought from morn 'til night,
A fierce and deadly struggle in the light.
At Last, it was Alarik's skill and might,
That quelled the rebellion, a bitter fight.

Though Anwir's treachery had caused great woe,
King Alarik's true strength began to show.
He rules with wisdom, justice, and with grace,
In England's history, a shining trace.

As the sun sank low, in the sky's fiery hue,
The rebels beat, their end had been in view.
Anwir, defeated, his dreams would undo,
In the face of Alarik, they withdrew.

Betrayal's price, he now would have to pay,
For his rebellion, no mercy could sway.
In the end, a lesson we all must heed,
That treachery's bitter fruit is born of greed.

(applause)

ELIO: Che meraviglia! Alessandro, hai sentito?

ALESSANDRO: Sì, Elio. Molto bello.

ELIO: Bravissimo, Delancey!

DELANCEY: Oh, thank you, your Majesty.

ALARIK: Was it to your liking?

ELIO: Oh, sì! Did you really kill him?

ALARIK: I did.

ELIO: Ah, che uomo crudele, Alessandro.

ALESSANDRO: Ma ora sei ancora più attratto da lui, vero?

ELIO: Non ti sbagli, Alessandro.

ALARIK: What are you saying? Nothing too awful, I hope.

ELIO: I said you were a cruel man, Alarik. Alessandro accused me of being even more attracted to you because of it. He is not wrong.

ALESSANDRO: Dio mio…

ALARIK: Will you do me the honour of a dance, Elio?

ELIO: Of course.

(Orchestra picks back up. Alarik leads Elio in a dance.)

ALARIK: Do you never wear shoes?

ELIO: I am prettier without.

ALARIK: You are beautiful. If I had known Italy had such a beautiful heir I would have asked for your hand in marriage much sooner.

ELIO: Do you really wish to marry me? Without knowing me?

ALARIK: Elio, I know you like the sun knows the stars, like the preacher knows his gospel, like how God recognises a King.

ELIO: Yet you do not know who I am. You do not know why I am here.

ALARIK: You are here for me, of course. Do you not feel how my soul yearns for yours? It is fate that has brought us together, let us not ignore fate, my darling.

ELIO: Are you in love with me, your Majesty?

ALARIK: I fear I may be, Elio.

ELIO: And if I do not share in your feelings?

ALARIK: I can see it in your eyes, my love. You would not be in my arms if you did not. The red string pulls at you as much as it does me.

ELIO: And where will it lead us, this string of fate that ties us together? To salvation or perdition?

ALARIK: I am already at the Golden Gates by simply looking at you, grant me entry and we shall see Heaven together.

ELIO: Save me from perdition then, your Majesty.

Exit Elio and Alarik

FIDEL: We should not let this happen.

LENNON: Fidel! Let Alarik have fun.

LAMONT: I have rarely seen him so happy.

DELANCEY: And the Prince is truly lovely.

FIDEL: Perhaps…There is something I wish to speak of with you, follow me.

Exit Fidel, Lennon, Lamont, and Delancey.
Alessandro follows discreetly. Exit.

LADY PRISCILLA: How surprising!

LADY ROSAMUND: Oh, I would simply die, Priscilla, if the King looked upon me in such a way.

LADY PRISCILLA: Did you hear any of what they were saying?

LADY ROSAMUND: I did not, but how I wish I did!

MARCEL: I overheard the King speaking earlier before their dance.

LADY PRISCILLA: Oh, Marcel, you must tell us!

MARCEL: The Prince has accepted a courting gift.

LADY ROSAMUND: From the King?

WILLIAM: Who else?

LADY PRISCILLA: Oh gosh!

LADY ROSAMUND: Well, I cannot say I blame our King! The rumours were certainly true about the Prince, he is devastatingly beautiful.

LADY PRISCILLA: Perhaps if the Prince will be staying with us his handsome friend will too.

LADY ROSAMUND: Priscilla! You tart!

(they laugh)

MARCEL: Shall we move to the parlour, Ladies? I heard the most scandalous tale about Lady Margaret and her intended.

LADY PRISCILLA: Oh! You boys! Hurry then, we must hear it!

Exeunt

Scene two

In one of the castle's hallways.
Enter Fidel, Lennon, Lamont, and Delancey

DELANCEY: What is it, Fidel?

FIDEL: I am worried.

LAMONT: Did you not say the company would do him good?

LENNON: I have been urging him to take a lover, as have you, Fidel, and there is no finer choice.

FIDEL: This is unlike him, I worry the curse is at play.

LAMONT: The curse is a myth. His mother was mad, that is no curse.

FIDEL: He gifted the Prince his mother's locket.

DELANCEY: You do not believe the locket is cursed? Surely.

FIDEL: Not the locket no, he was smitten the moment he laid eyes on the Prince—

LENNON: And for good reason! I worried I would fall at his feet when I welcomed him.

FIDEL: This is not a simple matter of attraction. I just worry.

LAMONT: Allow him this pleasure, Fidel. Hopefully it will deter him from his increasingly ludicrous goals.

FIDEL: He has it in him though—the madness. We have laid witness to it before, Lamont.

LAMONT: The obsession, yes.

LENNON: What his mother had was not simply obsession—obsession does not end in a bloodbath.

FIDEL: It very well can do, Lennon. My father speaks of the night as if it were war.

Enter Alessandro

ALESSANDRO: What did his mother do?

LAMONT: I would be careful if I were you, such behaviour can be mistaken for spying.

ALESSANDRO: I have no ill intent, my friend. I find myself alone, as your King seems to have been bewitched by my Prince. I apologise for the intrusion, I merely thought I might conduct business, as Elio seems…otherwise preoccupied.

FIDEL: Conduct business?

ALESSANDRO: Only politics, my friend. That is why we are here.

LAMONT: You are a politician?

ALESSANDRO: A politician, a bodyguard, a friend. I am what my King wishes me to be. — Tell me, what did Alarik's mother do?

LENNON: She—

FIDEL: Lennon, perhaps it would not be wise to divulge information on our Lord without him present.

DELANCEY: It is no secret amongst the people what happened, Fidel. Treating it as such only makes it seem worse than it is.

LAMONT: He is not wrong, it is no secret.

FIDEL: So be it.

LENNON: The King and Queen were happily married, until rumour spread that the King had been unfaithful. He claimed to have not wanted to marry his wife, that there was no love between them. This was after Alarik was born, of course. The Queen could not bear to hear it, she loved him dearly, and she was very jealous of all other ladies of the Court. She killed all the women during one of their afternoon activities before killing the King and herself.

ALESSANDRO: Dio mio…

FIDEL: Her ire was born of jealousy.

ALESSANDRO: And is your King a jealous man?

LAMONT: We mustn't speak of such matters.

FIDEL: Certainly not here, come.

Exeunt

Scene three

In Alarik's rooms
Piano plays.
Enter Elio and Alarik

Dance sequence.

Exit Elio

ALARIK, *alone*: What a marvel! Such beauty, such grace, a divine phenomenon. Divine appointment, indeed. — But who else has seen him so? Who else has laid claim to him? Who else has held him in their arms? Who else has felt the golden chains that wrap around him?

To the public: Who else has dared to look at him? This picture is mine, can anyone else claim the emeralds of his eyes? They are mine by right. What is a King without riches? Without art? Without power? — They wish to take him from me, they wish to take my power, my prize. I will kill them. I will kill all who have seen him, all who claim to know him, all who wish to take him from me.

The curtain draws—End of Act III.

ACT IV

Scene one

A hallway in the castle.
Enter Alessandro

ALESSANDRO: I must find Elio. He must have finished by now. We must make haste if we are to leave, another opportunity such as this will not present itself again. Elio is quick, agile, and the King is smitten—it must be done at present. The King must be dead. — And if he is not, I do not like what I have heard of him, I must warn Elio.

Enter Alarik

ALESSANDRO: Your Majesty! I was just looking for Elio, do you know where he is?
To the public: It would seem Elio may be more enamoured with the King than I believed.

ALARIK: You seek him, why?

ALESSANDRO: I do not understand, your Majesty.

ALARIK: For what purpose do you seek him? For what reason do you wish to take him from me?

ALESSANDRO: Take him? Your Majesty, I must simply assure that Elio is well.

ALARIK: You think I would hurt him?

ALESSANDRO: I did not mean to insinuate as such, your Majesty.

ALARIK: What is the nature of your relationship to him?

ALESSANDRO: Your Majesty? I am his friend, one of his oldest.

ALARIK: You covet him then?

ALESSANDRO: I would never!

ALARIK: Do not take me for a fool. Every person within and outside of these walls covets him!

ALESSANDRO: I can assure you I do not. You are worrying me, your Majesty. Where is Elio?

ALARIK: You dare speak his name?

ALESSANDRO: Where is he?

ALARIK: You want him.

ALESSANDRO: I simply wish to know that he is well! Have you done something to him?

ALARIK: I am protecting him!

ALESSANDRO: How so? I hardly believe he needs protecting from me!

ALARIK: On the contrary, *Alessandro*.

(he pulls out a dagger and stabs Alessandro)

ALESSANDRO: No!

(he dies)

ALARIK, *alone*: He wished to take Elio from me, I am certain of it. What is done is done. Elio need not know, and if he does he will forgive me.

Exit Alarik

ELIO, *offstage*: Alarik! Alessandro! Alessandro dove sei? Alarik! —

Enter Elio

ELIO: Alessandro — Alessandro, cose c'è che non va? Alessandro, what is happening? Alessandro! No no no no no, Alessandro svegliati! Wake up! There's so much blood—Help! Someone!

Enter Delancey

DELANCEY: Your Majesty, is everything—oh my! What has happened?

ELIO: I do not know! I found him here, he needs help!

DELANCEY: Guards! Guards! They will come, is he alive?

ELIO: I do not know.

DELANCEY: Let me check. It will be alright, Elio, do not worry. — Oh no.

ELIO: What? Is he—oh, dio mio, non può essere morto, non Alessandro.

DELANCEY: I'm so sorry, Elio. Come here, I'm so sorry.

Enter two guards

THE FIRST GUARD: Delancey! What has happened?

DELANCEY: I do not know. The Prince found him.

THE SECOND GUARD: Murder? Murder in the castle? Who has done such a thing?

DELANCEY: You must find out!

ELIO: Who would do this? What has Alessandro done?

DELANCEY: Elio, we will discover who the culprit is, we will get justice for your friend. It is alright, I'm so sorry.

Enter Alarik

THE FIRST GUARD: Your Majesty! There has been a murder in the castle!

DELANCEY: Alarik! Thank goodness! We need to find out who did this, perhaps they are still close.

ALARIK: Delancey let go of him! Come here, Elio, into my arms. I have you.

ELIO: Alarik, who would do this?

ALARIK: It will be alright, come with me, you should not have to see this. You can trust me to look after everything, just hold onto me.

Exit Elio and Alarik

THE FIRST GUARD: But what shall we do? Why did his Majesty not order a search of the grounds?

DELANCEY: I am not sure…Dispose of the body, gentlemen. It is a tragedy Elio had to be the one to uncover it. I will speak with the others, stay alert.

THE SECOND GUARD: Of course, Delancey. We will patrol the hallways anyway.

DELANCEY: Very good.

Exit the guards. They take Alessandro's body with them.

DELANCEY, *alone*: Poor Elio…he is such a nice boy. I worry Alarik was not surprised, he did not spare a glance to the deceased body of his beloved's friend. May he rest in peace, valiant Alessandro. Let us hope history is not repeating itself as it has a nasty tendency of doing.

Exeunt

Scene two

In Alarik's rooms.
Enter Elio and Alarik

ALARIK: Here, my love, you can rest here, you will be safe. I will look after everything, I will keep you safe.

ELIO: How could this have happened?

ALARIK: I will tend to it.

ELIO: Alessandro is dead, Alarik! There is nothing to tend to.

ALARIK: I will make sure nothing can happen to you.

ELIO: Perhaps we shouldn't have…It was foolish of me to abandon my friend in unknown territory.

ALARIK: No, no, no, Elio, listen to me. It is not your fault. People want to get to you, and they will pay for it.

ELIO: You think this is an attack on me?

ALARIK: I did not say that, my darling. Are you feeling alright?

ELIO: I am not certain. Perhaps I should leave for my own rooms.

ALARIK: No, stay here, Elio. You can trust me, I promise. I will look after you. I will find Delancey, and we shall talk to the guards. I will be back soon, my love.

ELIO: Alarik—

ALARIK: Yes, my love?

ELIO: Be sensible.

ALARIK: I'm afraid I am anything but when it comes to you, Elio.

ELIO: Be careful, then.

ALARIK: I will return shortly, my darling.

ELIO: Va bene, amore.

Exit Alarik

ELIO, *alone*: Alessandro, what a tragedy! He was a good man. Alarik asks me to trust him when my friend has just been assassinated within these very walls, though my mistrust is perhaps misplaced. After all, I should be the one who is not trustworthy. But there is something…I do not believe Alarik to be innocent in this affair. Perhaps from one assassin to another, it is a shared knowledge. I see it in his eyes—he was not surprised when he saw Alessandro. — Ah, che oribile! With Alessandro gone, it would be wise to focus on my intended task, it would only be fair, to avenge a friend. But I find myself reluctant to do so —

to choose between revenge and love! How terrible! How the fates have forsaken me! I must find answers.

Exeunt

Scene three

In a hallway in the castle.
Enter Fidel, Lamont, and Lennon

FIDEL: Where are all the guards?

LENNON: I am uncertain, Fidel. But perhaps we should take a moment to discuss things.

FIDEL: What is there to discuss? There has been a murder, Lennon! We must do everything in our power to secure the castle! What if something were to happen to Alarik?

LENNON: But that is what I wish to speak of! Have you forgotten what Delancey said?

FIDEL: He was shaken up! He had just laid witness to a murdered man, Lennon, he does not know what he says.

LAMONT: Fidel, it was you who was worried for Alarik's behaviour only this evening! You cannot cast aside Delancey's observations.

FIDEL: He did not do this. He has been with the Prince all evening.

LAMONT: That is untrue! The Prince found his friend while he was looking for Alarik himself! You heard what Delancey said, he went after the Prince because he heard him looking for Alarik.

FIDEL: What if this is a ploy? What if this is their doing?

LENNON: The dead man's? Fidel you are being preposterous! If it is not Alarik himself then it is simply an assassin!

FIDEL: Ah! Guards! Finally!

Enter two guards

THE FIRST GUARD: My Lord, we have disposed of the body, as Delancey asked of us.

FIDEL: Very well, you must lock the castle down. No one is to enter or leave before we have found the culprit.

THE SECOND GUARD: Well, my Lord, we shall assemble the guard.

LENNON: Ah! Who goes there?

Enter Alarik

ALARIK: It is merely me, Lennon, fear not.

FIDEL: Alarik! Thank goodness you are well!

LAMONT: How is Elio, my Lord?

ALARIK: Guards, I will ask you to leave the castle for the night. This is an internal affair and I wish to treat it as such. Escort any loiterers out.

THE FIRST GUARD: Your Majesty?

FIDEL: Alarik, what is the meaning of this?

ALARIK: That is an order, gentlemen.

THE SECOND GUARD: Very well, your Majesty. Of course.

Exit the guards

FIDEL: Alarik?

ALARIK: Where is Delancey? I wish to see him.

LAMONT: My Lord—he has retired to his rooms, he is very unwell with the whole business.

LENNON: What do you wish to see him for?

ALARIK: I merely need to ask him about what he witnessed.

FIDEL: Alarik—wait! What shall we do about this?

ALARIK: I am sure you will come up with something, Fidel.

Exit Alarik

FIDEL: What?

LENNON: Do you see now? You cannot tell me he is in his right mind!

LAMONT: I worry for Elio, Fidel. Perhaps we should check on him.

FIDEL: I am…uncertain of what is happening.

LENNON: As are we, Fidel! I agree with Lamont, we must assure that Elio is well.

FIDEL: Very well…you and Lamont go to Elio, see to him.

LAMONT: And yourself?

FIDEL: I will try and reason with Alarik. I do not believe he did this, but he is not acting correctly. I will go to him.

LENNON: Are you certain, Fidel?

FIDEL: I am his friend, Lennon, I will reason with him.

LAMONT: Very well, Fidel. Come, Lennon.

Exeunt

Scene four

Enter Delancey
In his room.

DELANCEY, *alone*: This is ridiculous—I am being ridiculous. He will not come for me. He did not kill Alessandro. Alarik would never do such a thing, unprovoked, no less! Come morning everything will be alright, the culprit will be caught, and our minds will be eased. There is no need to panic. — Ah! Who goes there?

ALARIK, *offstage*: It is me, Delancey, open the door.

DELANCEY: My Lord? (*to the public*) No, no, no, this cannot be happening! Has he truly come to kill me too?

ALARIK: I wish to speak to you of what you have seen. Your account of matters will aid our search.

DELANCEY: Oh, oh. Of course, my Lord, come in.

Enter Alarik

DELANCEY: My Lord—Alarik? — How is Elio?

ALARIK: You wish to speak of him? You utter his name?

DELANCEY: Alarik—please, what is this concerning? I did not see anything of the crime. I merely found Elio mourning his friend.

ALARIK: And you thought to take advantage of that, am I correct?

DELANCEY: Advantage of what, Alarik? I do not follow.

ALARIK: Do not take me for a fool, Delancey. You dared touch him, put your hands on him —

DELANCEY: In comfort, my Lord! He had just lost a friend!

(Alarik unsheathes his dagger)

DELANCEY: Alarik! Please see reason! This is not you! He is yours, I do not want him. Please—

(Alarik stabs him)

DELANCEY: Alarik—please—

ALARIK: Rest well, Delancey.

(*Delancey dies*)

ALARIK: It is a shame to lose a friend, but I must protect my love from prying eyes and covetous hands.

(Alarik drags Delancey's corpse away)

Exeunt

Scene five

In the hallway, in front of the King's quarters.
Enter Lennon and Lamont

LAMONT: Can you hear anything? Is he inside?

LENNON: I cannot. We should enter anyway.

LAMONT: We do not want to seem rude, Lennon. Perhaps he wishes to be alone, or is simply awaiting Alarik's return.

LENNON: He is mourning a friend, Lamont. It is our duty to make sure our guests are well, we cannot simply leave him in a moment of need.

LAMONT: You are correct, I apologise. To tell you the truth, I am slightly worried about irking Alarik.

LENNON: Fidel is handling it, we must trust him, and trust our King.

LAMONT: Again, Lennon, you seem to have more reason than me tonight.

LENNON: A rare occasion, I am certain. Let me open the door then.

LAMONT: Oh, God, Lennon—

LENNON: What is it—oh no.

Enter Alarik, covered in blood

ALARIK: What are you doing?

LAMONT: Alarik! What has happened? Have you been attacked?

LENNON: You are covered in blood!

ALARIK: What do you think you are doing?

LENNON: We were merely coming to check on Elio, my Lord. We did not want to seem like careless hosts.

ALARIK: That is all you can think of—the only word that comes out of any of your mouths.

LAMONT: Alarik—what?

ALARIK: Why do you all wish to take him?

LENNON: Take him? Alarik, what have you done?

LAMONT: Where is Fidel? Where is Delancey?

LENNON: Taking who, Alarik? What do you mean?

ALARIK: Elio, of course. The Prince. The love of my life.

LAMONT: Alarik, no one wants to take him from you.

ALARIK: And yet you are here, before my room, looking for him. What did you wish to achieve? Warn him about me? Take him away? Take him for yourselves?

LENNON: Of course not! These accusations are baseless and preposterous, Alarik! Did you kill Alessandro? Was it you?

ALARIK: He wanted Elio for himself.

LAMONT: But who have you hurt in the meantime? Not Delancey, surely! Not Fidel!

ALARIK: I hardly think that is something you need worry yourself with, Lamont.

LAMONT: What—Alarik!

(Alarik stabs him)

LENNON: Alarik! What have you done? Lamont! Help! Guards!

(*Alarik attacks him)*

LENNON: Alarik stop this madness!

(They fight)

LENNON: Help! Someone! Help!

(Alarik stabs him)

LENNON: Ah! We were friends…

(*Lennon dies*)

ALARIK: For what it is worth, I am sorry.

LAMONT: Alarik…please…

(Alarik slits his throat)
(*Lamont dies*)
(Alarik drags their bodies away)

Exeunt

Scene six

In a hallway in the castle.
Enter Fidel

FIDEL: This situation is getting out of hand. Delancey, dead. Oh, God, why? — Alarik refuses to have the castle locked down, why? And where is he? I have searched the entire castle, and yet I cannot find him. I worry something has happened to him, the hallway to his rooms was coated in blood. I must find him, I must make this right. How did this happen? How, how, how— Oh, God. Alarik—

Enter Alarik, covered in blood

FIDEL: What have you done?

ALARIK: I had to.

FIDEL: Alessandro?

ALARIK: Yes.

FIDEL: Delancey?

ALARIK: Yes.

FIDEL: Where are Lennon and Lamont?

ALARIK: Dead.

FIDEL: By your hand?

ALARIK: Yes.

FIDEL: And you have come for me now?

ALARIK: I do not know.

FIDEL: And Elio? Have you hurt him? Where is he?

(*Alarik unsheathes his dagger*)

ALARIK: Hurt him? You think I would hurt him? This is all for him, Fidel, do you not see?

FIDEL: All I see, Alarik, is a mad man. Look at yourself! Look what you have done!

ALARIK: They wanted to take him from me!

FIDEL: Who did? The whole world? No one wants to take him from you! You are victim to a delusion, Alarik, the same one your mother succumbed to—

ALARIK: Do not try and compare my love for Elio to my pathetic mother—

FIDEL: Then what is this? Was it not yesterday that you told me the same thing? But look at you, all your friends are dead, by your hand! You are convinced your jealousy is justified but it is misplaced and absurd.

ALARIK: I am not like her!

FIDEL: What will you do now? Kill me? And then what? Kill Elio? Kill yourself?

ALARIK: I would never hurt him!

FIDEL: What then? You will storm the streets? Kill all you come across? All who dare lay eyes on your precious Elio?

ALARIK: If I must!

FIDEL: You are your mother's son, Alarik, there is no doubt about it.

(*Alarik attacks him, holds the dagger to his throat*)

FIDEL: Ah! — I will ask God to release you from this madness, my friend.

(*Alarik snaps his neck*)
(*Fidel dies*)
(*Alarik drops his dagger. He staggers back. He looks at the public.*)

The curtain draws—End of Act IV.

ACT V

Scene one

In a hallway in the castle. The walls are streaked in blood.
Enter Elio

ELIO, *alone*: The castle is quiet, and yet it speaks in a murmur. It recalls the massacre that has taken place on this night, and the walls will remember it for years to come. It was not meant to be so, everything is wrong. The role of the assassin is played by the wrong person, his victims should have never died, and I should not still be here.

(*he drags his hand through the blood on the wall*)

ELIO, *alone*: And yet, red is the colour of love, of romance. It is a red that shines in his eyes, in his heart. What a terrible night, a terrible fate. Perhaps love cannot be more than a tragedy, more than a massacre. I should not have entertained him, perhaps I should not have come. I allowed myself this pleasure, the one of falling in love. I do not regret it, yet I mourn it.

(*his ankle bracelets sound out*)

ELIO, to the public: It is time to set the roles right.

Exeunt

Scene two

In the throne room.
Enter Alarik

ALARIK, *alone*: What have I done? — What have I done? — What have I done? — If I have Elio, everything will be fine. Everything is fine. He will forgive me. Our love will conquer all.

Enter Elio

ELIO: Your Majesty.

ALARIK: Elio! My love.

ELIO: You have blood on your hands, your Majesty.

ALARIK: It will wash off.

ELIO: I am not so sure. Why did you do it? Why did you kill them all?

ALARIK: For you.

ELIO: Such a selfish reason.

ALARIK: But it was for you.

ELIO: It was not for me if it was for yourself. If it was for you to keep me for yourself.

ALARIK: You do not understand—

ELIO: I understand perfectly well. My father warned me of love, of wars that started because of jealousy and grief. When I was nothing but a child I was dubbed a Helen of Troy, and my father vowed to keep me sealed away for this very reason. He warned me to never trust a man in love—to never succumb to the woes of love because they are but a step from madness. And as I look at you, a man I was told was strong, stoic, brave, powerful, and cruel—I see that my father was correct. A man in love is nothing but a fool. But I never heeded my father's warnings, love is not this—love is not war, and bloodshed, and violence. Love is not bathed in blood but in sunlight. You are a fool, Alarik, but you do not love me.

ALARIK: But you are sunlight, my love.

ELIO: You do not love me. You are mad, deranged, obsessed—but you are not in love.

ALARIK: I am all of those things and so much more, but that does not mean I do not love you. I have loved you since I laid my eyes upon you, I have loved you since before we met, I have loved you since the creation of the stars, and since long before that. My love for you is unconditional, unbound, untamed by time, untouched by others, violent and bloody—but it is no less love.

ELIO: If it is so, I do not want it. I do not want your tainted love, it is wholly selfish—you make something so beautiful, so pure such as love, ugly.

ALARIK: But it is for you—how can anything for you be ugly? Everything about you is beautiful, my love for you can be nothing but a thing of beauty. You stepped into this castle and suddenly everything about it was breathtaking—the sight of you alone brought light into its dreary walls. You bring beauty into the world, into my world. Artwork I had never glanced at, I stopped to contemplate. I watched the gardens, and the flowers. I entertained the people. All these things, I had never thought of as beautiful—but how could I not? When your sunlight reflected on everything you had come into contact with?

ELIO: If your love is so beautiful, what is this? The blood stains your hands, your clothes, the walls of your castle! Where did the beauty go? Did it flee from your undeserving grasp?

(*Alarik drops to his knees)*

ALARIK: My dear Elio, can you not see? Even in this there is beauty! It is devotion, proof of my love for you. I would paint the grounds of this very castle, as well as the sky above, with the blood of all those who dare glance in your direction, and it would make for the most beautiful picture. It would be a canvas of devotion.

ELIO: I would have married you, you fool. I would have been content, to just have you.

ALARIK: Elio, if I loved you any less, I would kill you. And if I loved you any more, I would kill everyone else.

ELIO: You have already killed all those around us.

ALARIK: I cannot love you any more.

ELIO: And if I do not love you?

(Elio unsheathes a dagger behind his back)

ALARIK: If I cannot have you I will decimate every single person in the world. If I cannot have you, no one can. I will have you or I will die.

ELIO: Then you shall die, Alarik. And I am sorry for it.

(he stabs him through the heart)

ALARIK: Elio—

(he dies)
(Elio makes to exit the stage. His ankle bracelets sound out. He turns to face Alarik.)

ELIO, *alone*: Love is not all we make it out to be. Love is beautiful, and pure, sunlight that warms your skin, a cold breeze that takes your breath away. Love is made of the smell of flowers and a shared look. But love is also ugly—it is violent, and bloody, and murderous. It is jealous and obsessive, it is painful and full of sorrow. It is human, and there is nothing more flawed, nothing more tragic. And I am no less a fool for it.

(he returns to Alarik's side)

ELIO, *alone*: Perhaps it was fate, perhaps doom, maybe we were destined to die before our story started. Perhaps we were already dead.

(He wrenches the dagger from Alarik's chest and slices his own skin with it.)

ELIO, *to the public*: But there is no greater tragedy, no flaw more fatal, than love.

(He dies. He falls back—into Alarik's awaiting arms.)

Final curtain drop—The end.

Chapter End Notes

Very important note : **my beta (SilverWolf12) wrote Delancey's poem in Act III, Scene 1** so a huge thank you to them for that they did an amazing job of it!! <3

Also, my friend peep, with only the character name meanings said: *"Alarik, the "leader of all"-- but still he lives, breathes, and resides on the planet that revolves around the sun."* .... her brain omg she gagged me when she said that.

And lastly, big thank you to Mimi who gave me some extra feedback for this and who was very lovely about it <3

Anyway, I hope you liked it, let me know in the comments :)

Let's hope Act V is out on time Friday, see you then xx

Chapter 6: Act V

Chapter Notes

hello! the final act is here!
I don't have anything in particular to note other than Scenes 11 and 12 serve as an epilogue!
Happy reading xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ACT V

—Scene one—

Finally having the name of the play meant they could finalise their posters. It was a good thing Tom had apparently had his epiphany because they were really running out of time by that point.

“It took you five months to come up with *that*?” Theo had asked with an unimpressed scoff.

Harry didn’t know what to think of the title of the play. It was *him*—his character. It was blatantly depicting him as the main character, and Tom had said it like it was the simplest thing, the most obvious choice.

Tom had ignored Theo’s comment as he offered Harry a small smile. “It’s a beautiful song,” he said, before taking his leave.

Harry had watched him go, slack jawed.

Almost a week later, and Harry wasn’t any less confused by what it all meant. Surrounded by posters of himself and Tom whenever he was in the castle, the word ‘*ELIO*’ printed in bold, he felt like he was dreaming, a dream he couldn’t possibly make sense of.

People stared at him in the hallways, recognising him from the large posters tacked up almost everywhere, and he was starting to think they could see something he could not. As if they could see through him.

His turmoil followed him everywhere he went; through the castle’s large hallways, into its classrooms, into the village, the library in the chapel, up into his bed, into the theatre. It clung to the very marrow of his bones and would not let go, forcing him to drag it along everywhere he went. In the dead of night, it crept up to his throat, suffocating him.

The heartbreak still resonated in his chest, and he couldn’t find a way to let go, he couldn’t get over Tom. How could he—he was always *right there*. He was the first thing Harry saw in the morning, the last before falling asleep. He followed him into his dreams and plagued his thoughts. There was no escape, and Harry could not *let go*.

The first week of June they rehearsed every day and it was catastrophic, to say the least. There was an icy coldness that had wedged itself between them all, making everything unbearably awkward.

Theo still wasn’t speaking to Tom, and it bled through in his performance. He wouldn’t look directly at him, and all his lines were spoken with cold detachment. Alphard was lacking in his usual energy, and Rick, Abraxas, and Gaspar were thrown off their game by everyone else’s bad acting.

The worst though, was Harry. He could barely touch Tom without flinching, making him tense at every one of their interactions. He couldn't put on his playfully flirty facade, and the dance was almost painful. Tom tried, and Harry couldn't fault him for it, but after a while he started to pull back. It got to a point where they could barely look each other in the eye, and they didn't talk to one another for days on end outside of their characters' dialogue.

It all came to a head on the Friday of that first week, when they were in the middle of rehearsing Act three, scene one.

Tom stood up in the middle of his and Harry's stilted dialogue, cutting the scene off abruptly.

"Tom, what're you doing?" Cassandra asked from the desk in front of the stage.

Ignoring her, Tom stood on the edge of the stage, pinching the bridge of his nose before he turned to look at them again. Everyone was staring at him, all the extras stopping in their tracks.

"This is ridiculous," he said, with no little amount of frustration in his voice, and Harry almost flinched. "*We're* all being ridiculous. This is the single most important play of our education and we're fucking it up. If we go on like this we're not gonna graduate." He huffed, running a hand across his face. "We are *actors*," he pressed, "it doesn't matter what goes on offstage, we leave all that behind once we step onto the stage. And frankly if we're not capable of doing that I'm not sure we deserve to graduate at all."

Theo made to stand up, his eyes narrowed and angry, but Harry stopped him. It was like Tom's words had slapped some lucidity into him for what felt like the first time since the incident. *He* was messing it all up for everyone, *he* was the one who couldn't let go.

"You're right," he said, looking him in the eye. It was the most resolute his voice had been in weeks, and he didn't shy away from Tom's piercing gaze. "You're right, I'm sorry. We are actors, and as such I should be able to overlook whatever's going on."

"Harry—" Theo said, but Harry shook his head pointedly.

"Tom's right," he said again, returning Tom's small smile when he looked back towards him.

"Theo," Tom said, taking a step forward, "maybe we should have a chat."

"I have nothing to say to you," Theo said petulantly.

"I have some things I'd like to talk about," Tom said, and the softness and sincerity of his voice must have struck a chord in Theo because they just looked at each other for a moment.

Eventually, Theo nodded minutely. Then, quietly: "Okay."

"Okay, good," Tom said, clearing his throat. "I think we should stop for today. Hopefully everyone will pull themselves together over the weekend, and we'll have a better performance to give on Monday, one worthy of what we're capable of."

Alphard looked at Harry, giving him a smile before he stood up. “You’re right, Tom,” he said, and it was as good as an apology for the cold shoulder he’d been giving him. “I suggest I take you all out to the village this weekend, do some rekindling between us.”

“I suppose,” Theo said, glancing at them all with a smile, “if Patrick Swayze and Jennifer Grey could give such a great performance despite hating each other, we can be as good as we’re supposed to be. None of us hate each other, we’re actually quite fond of one another, I think.”

“Yes, thanks for the *Dirty Dancing* reference, Theo,” Alphard said with a laugh. They all laughed lightly, and for a moment it felt like everything was back to normal.

“Let’s go then,” Tom said. “Sorry for the terrible week,” he said to the younger years, “we’ll be better next week.”

“Er—okay,” Cassandra said, looking beyond confused.

As they left the stage, Harry, his heart in his throat, caught up to Tom and pulled on his sleeve.

Tom turned to him, his expression that of open curiosity, soft in its sincerity. “Yes?” he prompted with a smile. It felt careful, like he was scared of treading wrong and saying the wrong thing.

Harry felt awful for how far they’d fallen. He went to speak but glanced down at where his hand was still scrunched up in Tom’s clothes and let go quickly, laughing nervously. “I just —” he cleared his throat, eyes shifting to and from Tom— “I just wanted to say sorry. I’m just very—I feel bad,” he amended, careful of what he said, “about what happened. And I’m dealing with it in the worst possible way—by avoiding you, that is.”

Tom hummed, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth.

Harry looked away, cheeks heating up. Despite everything, he still wanted him, was still devastatingly, tragically, in love with him. He looked up, trying for his best genuine smile. “What I’m trying to say is, I miss you.”

A few things flashed across Tom’s face in quick succession, too fast for Harry to decipher, but what remained was surprise, and the first tendrils of a happy smile. “I miss you too,” he whispered, and it felt like something slotting back into place, as if the universe had just righted its axis slightly.

Harry smiled, he couldn’t help it. For a moment it was just like before, before the kiss and the heartbreak. He’d almost forgotten that prior to that he’d also been in love with Tom, and everything had been fine. Maybe he could do it again.

The last of Tom’s reticent demeanour dropped, and a grin split out across his face. “Come here,” he said playfully, beckoning him forward.

Harry swallowed, ignored the pang of hurt in his chest, and let Tom wrap him up in a hug. He wrapped his arms around his waist in turn, taking a shaky breath as he was assaulted by Tom's familiar smell, the feel of his body against his. It was like coming back home. More exactly, it was like going back to his parents' house after they died. It had all the marks of home, the smell, the familiarity, but the heart was missing. The love was still there, a ghost haunting the hallways, filling up every empty space, but more than love, it was filled with loss.

"Ready for that chat?" Theo said from beside them, making them pull apart.

"Let's get changed," Tom said, colour high on his cheeks, hand lingering on Harry's shoulder. "Then we can talk, it might take a while."

"Okay," Theo said, shifting his gaze to Harry who looked down at the floor quickly, struggling to catch his breath.

"You coming, Harry?" Tom asked brightly.

Harry looked up, nodding quickly as he set off towards the dressing rooms with them.

He would do this, he decided. He would give the play his everything, his most sincere rendition of Elio. And offstage he would try his best to rekindle his friendship with Tom. He'd beat his heart into compliance if he had to, but he wouldn't let go, because he simply was not able to. Love could be such a burden, but he would conquer it.

—Scene two—

In the weeks leading up to the play, things got better. Tom's initiative to give them a reality check was the best thing that could've happened to them.

He and Theo came back from their chat once again as the best of friends, in their own way. Alphard held true to his offer to take them out that weekend, taking them all to a restaurant in the village where they shared a nice meal and a lot of laughs. Those two days allowed the air to clear between them.

Harry woke up a bit, not quite burying his hurt within himself, but healing from it enough to not choke on it anytime he glanced Tom's way. It got easier everyday, to share significant looks with him, to chat casually with him. They didn't spend much time alone together, when they did it was usually in the evening, each reading quietly in their respective beds.

They learnt to share the stage together again, Harry forcing himself to leave himself behind everytime he stepped onto the stage, becoming wholly Elio, and doing his best to see Tom as none other than Alarik. It worked well, and after a while acting became as effortless as it used to be for him.

It was hard not to notice, though, how Tom often made aborted gestures to touch him casually like he was in the habit of doing, how his smiles seemed to linger when directed at him.

Harry never stopped being in love with him. He thought he might always be, just a bit. He couldn't quite remember who he was before he fell in love with Tom, but he discovered who he had become since. He learnt to live with it.

The play itself crept up on them like a death sentence. It loomed in the distance, daunting and frightening—until it didn't.

The day of the play came too soon for Harry's liking, and when he woke up on the 29th of June, it was in a cold sweat.

So much was going on inside of him, absolute terror at having to perform the play in the evening, doubts about his own abilities, the nerves that always came with performing, and an overwhelming sense of excitement about seeing Sirius, Remus, Ron, and Hermione again.

"Harry," Tom whispered harshly, the sound cutting through the silent room. It was still dark out, very little light but the first rays of day shining into the room. "Are you okay? You're hyperventilating I think."

Harry looked over at him, swallowing as he rubbed his eyes. "Sorry," he whispered back, catching his breath, "woke up in a panic."

"At least you got some sleep," Tom said, huffing out a laugh as he dropped onto his back, staring up at the ceiling.

Harry laid back down, swallowing the rest of his panic as he turned on his side to look at him. “Did you not manage any?”

Tom shrugged, the rustle of the sheets loud in the silence. “On and off kind of, but I don’t feel like I’ve had any sleep, no.”

“Nervous?”

They were talking in hushed tones, the sound calming, peaceful, a contrast to the whirling of both their minds. It was nice, and Harry took comfort in it.

“A bit, yeah,” Tom said, turning onto his side to face Harry, his sheets rustling again. “Not about playing, as such, but more about if everything will go well.”

“There’s no reason it won’t,” Harry reassured. A breeze passed through the open window, sweeping over his burning skin, relieving him of some of the tension clinging to him. In the distance, something fell into the lake, resounding over the grounds with a quiet splash. Harry sat up, planting his feet on the floor. “I’ll let you get some sleep,” he said resolutely, “I think I’m gonna go for a swim.”

“Wait—” Tom said quickly, sitting up too.

Harry turned back towards him from where he was pulling on a t-shirt. “D’you want to come?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow. It was a statement, because Harry had not proposed they do something just the two of them ever since the incident.

“Yes,” Tom said immediately. “I would love to,” he added, his voice breathy, more than a whisper but less than his usual tone of voice.

“Okay, good,” Harry said, a smile teasing at his lips. “It’s only quarter to seven, we’ve got loads of time before family and friends arrive.”

“As long as we have time to have a shower,” Tom said, rifling through his wardrobe, presumably looking for some swimming shorts.

Harry didn’t have any, so he’d just go in his boxers.

“I don’t think I have any swim shorts,” Tom said, emerging from his wardrobe with a frown.

“I don’t either,” Harry said with a shrug.

“What're you going in?” Tom asked sceptically.

“Boxers.”

Tom hummed, seemingly weighing it up in his mind. “Yeah, that’ll have to do,” he decided.

Harry smiled, motioning for Tom to follow him with a tilt of his head. They padded through the chapel, finding only Rick sat on the counter in the kitchen, sipping some coffee.

“Hi,” he whispered in greeting when he caught sight of them. “Nerve wracking, innit?”

Harry nodded, wringing his hands together as a wave of nausea hit him. “Yep,” he said, the word catching in his throat.

“I’m gonna go for a run,” Rick said as Tom filled two mugs with some coffee, “sweat out the nerves, you know?”

“We’re gonna go for a swim,” Harry whispered, taking the mug Tom handed to him gratefully.

“In the lake?” Rick asked, looking surprised. When Harry nodded, he looked at him appraisingly. “Brave. Are you going, Tom?”

Tom nodded quickly. “I need to take my mind off the play.”

Rick hummed, crossing his ankles where they were hanging from the counter. “Understandable.”

“Where are you gonna run?” Harry asked. “In the woods?”

“Yeah, I think so,” he said pensively. “I’ll start in the woods and then I might go ‘round the lake a couple times.”

Harry hummed, cradling his coffee cup between his fingers as he glanced surreptitiously out of the window, it was a nervous gesture, one spurred on by the sporadic conversation.

“Friends and family are coming around ten, right?” Rick said, swallowing a mouthful of coffee through a grimace.

Harry nodded, yielding to the urge to bite at his thumb.

“Fucking hell, let’s go, Harry,” Tom said, an air of urgency to his voice. “I’m gonna have a fucking panic attack if we stay in here.”

Harry snorted, quite involuntarily, his coffee sloshing over the side of his mug with how it surprised him, not helped by his shaky fingers. “Okay, yeah.” He poured the remaining coffee down the sink. “Let’s go. See you later, Rick.”

“Bye guys,” Rick called as they left the kitchen quickly.

They pulled their shoes on urgently, Harry tripping over as he did so, only just catching himself on the wall.

Once they were outside, Tom took in a big lungful of fresh air, his breath shaky as he exhaled, and Harry wondered if he hadn’t been lying about the panic attack thing.

“You okay?” he asked, catching himself as he went to reach out to Tom’s arm, stopping before he could commit.

Tom didn't notice, taking another deep breath. "I'm fine," he said after another shaky exhale. "God, yeah, I'm fine. Just got a bit—panicky."

"Are you sure you don't want to go back to bed?" Harry asked, a shiver running down his spine as the cool air hit his exposed nape. "Some sleep would do you good."

"I'm never getting to sleep now," Tom said decisively. He took another breath, shaking himself as he did so. He set his shoulders, drawing himself up a bit taller. "Come on, let's go," he said, his eyes finding Harry's. "The water will do us some good."

"Yeah, okay," Harry agreed, setting off towards the lake again.

It was truly a beautiful place in the early morning sunrise. The grass under their feet was dewy, the odd wildflowers standing out with the shine of the moisture, and the horizon above was painted a dusty pink with the rising sun. The woods further on were dark, the trees standing tall. The lake itself was still, the water a dark green. The castle stood tall beside them, coated in a small fog, making it look ancient and mysterious.

Silently, they made their way to the beach, nothing but the sound of birds chirping accompanying them.

It wasn't exactly cold, but there was a bit of a nip in the air. When Tom took his t-shirt off, his skin was covered in goosebumps and he shivered, his shoulders tensing.

"You're not gonna get hypothermia again, are you?" Harry asked teasingly, stripping down to his boxers.

"I hope not," Tom said, kicking his shoes off.

Harry eyed him as he peeled his socks off, hopping on one foot to keep balance. A grin stretched across his face, and when Tom faced him properly, he said, "Race you to the other end of the lake," before taking off and diving into the water.

Tom called something behind him but Harry was submerged in the cold water before he could make it out. The world went silent for a moment when he was underwater and it did wonders for his nerves.

He swam out a few metres, making sure he had a head start before coming back up for air and turning to Tom who was still standing on the beach, arms crossed over his chest to shield himself from the cold, and feet resolutely buried in the sand. "Come on!" he called, laughing as he shook the water from his hair.

"You're mad," Tom said, shaking his head with a disbelieving laugh. "You could've died from cold shock."

Harry laughed loudly, his hair dipping back into the water. "Come on, don't be a ponce."

"Piss off," Tom grumbled, taking careful steps forward until his feet were in the water. He hissed at the cold.

Harry rolled his eyes, swiping his hand against the surface of the water to splash him.

“Harry!” Tom shouted as the water hit him. “For fuck’s sake.”

Harry shrieked out a laugh as Tom dived in resolutely, clearly intent on attacking him. He swam out further, trying to escape.

They both stopped swimming when they were near the bridge, a few metres between them.

“Come on,” Harry said once he’d stopped giggling breathlessly, “over to the other side and then back.”

Tom wiped the water out of his eyes, pushing his hair back as he did so. He looked absolutely delectable. His nose was red from the cold, as were his cheeks. “I’m not the best swimmer, you know.”

“I’ll save you if you start drowning,” Harry teased, motioning for Tom to catch up.

When he got to his level he stopped again, catching his breath. “You’d better,” he said, spitting some water out to the side. “We’re racing, aren’t we?”

It was a lot more attractive than it should’ve been, and Harry lost focus for a second, allowing Tom to dunk him with a victorious smirk. He came back up sputtering, laughing as he saw Tom swimming off towards the other end of the lake.

He took a deep breath and started swimming. His mind quietened as he tore through the water, his lungs burning when he didn’t come up for air fast enough. He had nothing in mind but the desire to beat Tom in the race.

When he got to the other side of the lake, he came up coughing and sputtering because of how out of breath he was. Tom was about twenty metres away, treading water, just staring at him.

“I won!” he gasped out, coughing as some water tickled the back of his throat.

“Competitive much?” Tom said, sounding amused and a bit judgemental.

Harry laughed, shrugging. “Don’t be a sore loser.”

Tom scowled. “I’m not being a sore loser, you’re ridiculous.” He swam over to Harry at a leisurely pace, the water rippling calmly around him, contrasting with the chaotic splashing Harry had done.

The sun was coming up slowly, the pink in the sky giving way to orange and yellow.

“Shall we jump off the bridge?” Harry proposed when Tom got to him. “For old times’ sake,” he added with a grin.

Tom huffed out a laugh, rolling his eyes. “Yeah okay,” he said, wiping away some droplets of water clinging to his eyelashes.

They swam back over to the bridge level of the lake slowly, savouring the quiet of the morning. Harry, for the first time in while, was just content to spend time with Tom. He wasn't plagued with the constant need to keep distance between them, or the images that flashed at the forefront of his mind of the kiss. It was just nice, it was like they always had been, as friends.

"Oh, careful, it's a bit cold when you get out," Harry warned, shivering once he'd climbed out onto the bank. He held out a hand to help Tom up, shivering again when their hands met.

"Thanks," Tom said, pushing his hair back. He looked like a model, a bloke straight out of those magazines Sirius hid under his bed like a teenager. His skin glistened with the water droplets sliding against it, his stomach pulled taught under the stretch of his arm. His boxers clung to his thighs, the black darker than it was because of the water.

"No problem, come on," Harry said, turning around quickly and walking up onto the bridge, the damp grass sinking under his feet. "Climb up, come on," he prompted when they got to the centre of the bridge.

Tom put his hands on the barrier, looking down sceptically. "How the fuck did we do this drunk?"

Harry snorted, lifting himself up precariously to balance on the barrier. "I've no idea, we really could've died."

"Give me a hand," Tom said when Harry had successfully climbed onto the barrier.

"Climb up on your knees and then I'll help you up," Harry instructed, watching Tom do as told.

"Okay," Tom said when he was balanced. He held a hand out and Harry took it. "Don't overbalance," he warned seriously.

Harry grinned, wrapping his fingers around Tom's wrist. "Let go of the barrier," he said, pulling him up.

His footing wasn't as steady as it should've been, and they were too close for him to pull Tom up properly.

"Let go of me!" Tom said urgently as Harry swayed, one foot leaving the barrier as he wobbled.

He ultimately tipped over on the lake side of the bridge, his hand still firmly wrapped around Tom's wrist. They both ended up falling over the side, Harry dragging Tom down with him.

The water hit Harry's side, sharp pain flaring up on his exposed ribs. He emerged from the water with a gasp, a laugh escaping him as he was met with Tom's annoyed glare.

"I told you to let me go," he said pointedly, and if he wasn't in the water, Harry was sure he'd be crossing his arms.

“You were the only thing keeping me up,” Harry countered with a laugh, spitting some water out to the side.

“Well, evidently not,” Tom said, gesturing to them in the water.

Harry snorted. “Fair enough,” he said, allowing Tom that. “Come on, that wasn’t actually a jump,” he added resolutely, wading back towards the bank.

“I’m not getting back out,” Tom said decisively. “It’s too cold.”

Harry groaned, splashing some water on him. “You’re no fun. Want to watch me do a backflip?”

Tom laughed, the sound spreading across the surface of the lake. “Alright then, go on.”

Harry grinned at him, climbing out of the lake as best he could. He only slipped a couple times, and it was only humiliating because Tom laughed every single time.

“Don’t die,” Tom warned as Harry got onto the bridge, looking up at him from the water. “We don’t have anyone to replace you tonight.”

Harry laughed, climbing onto the barrier. “I’d assumed the play would be off if I literally *died*.”

“Well, you thought wrong,” Tom teased, moving out of the way. “Priorities, you know? It’s not personal.”

Harry laughed, shaking his head as he turned carefully on the barrier so that his back was to the water. “Piss off,” he said, balancing himself.

“Come on, impress me with a backflip, Potter.”

Harry looked away, realising that that was exactly what he was doing. He shook his head, standing on the edge of the wooden barrier. He took a quick breath and jumped off. Modesty aside, it was a perfect backflip.

He came back up with a grin on his face. “Impressed?”

He caught Tom’s eye who was biting back a smile. “Begrudgingly so,” he replied, eyeing him with something like fondness.

It made Harry’s stomach flutter, and he laughed delightedly. He laid out on his back, spreading his arms and legs to float around. His ears were underwater, blocking out the sound from above. All he could see were the clouds forming in thin wisps, and it reminded him of how he and Tom had stargazed in December.

“Oi! Stop pretending to be a corpse,” Tom said, his voice muffled by the water, as he pinched Harry’s toes. “Want to do something fun?”

Harry righted himself, freeing his toes in the process. “What?”

Tom grinned. “Want to see if we can do the lift from *Dirty Dancing*?”

Harry’s eyebrows flew up, a surprised laugh escaping. “Okay then,” he agreed. “Let’s go back towards the beach.”

Tom nodded, following a second later.

It did look a lot like the scenery from *Dirty Dancing*, with the trees surrounding the area, the still lake, and the quiet atmosphere. Harry couldn’t believe the thought hadn’t crossed his mind.

They had a small water fight as they swam to the other side after Tom grabbed his ankle and yanked him underwater, but they got there eventually.

“Right,” Tom said, planting his feet in the sand when they were in shallow waters. The water reached just above his waist, and his skin shivered where it was exposed to the cool morning air. “You need to jump up pretty high, but I’ll do the rest.”

Harry rubbed his hands together, taking a breath. “Okay.”

“Ready?” Tom asked, holding his hands out.

Harry nodded, pulling his boxers up a bit higher to avoid them flying off him.

“Whenever you’re ready.”

He bounced on the balls of his feet for a second before lifting himself up in his tiptoes and jumping up. Tom’s hands set themselves on his hips and pushed up, until Harry was lifted above his head.

“Harry you need to—”

Tom didn’t get to finish because they both toppled over, Harry doing his best to dive into the water instead of just crashing in.

They both came back up laughing.

“What is it I need to do?” he asked through his giggles as he floated beside Tom.

Tom looked over at him, a grin adorning his face, his dimples carving themselves out. “You need to *engage your core*, as McGonagall would say. Hold yourself up basically, don’t be all floppy.”

“I wasn’t floppy!” Harry exclaimed, splashing some water at him.

“No, it wasn’t bad,” Tom said, shielding himself. “Come on, again.”

Harry laughed, wading over to stand back in front of him. “Don’t twist your wrist or anything, we’d look stupid if you got injured now.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Tom said, rolling his eyes. “Come on.”

They did the lift over and over again, inevitably losing balance and falling back into the water at some point or another. It was so much fun, despite the pain starting to bloom where Tom kept digging his thumbs into his hips, and they barely noticed time passing, the sun rising steadily on the horizon.

“Come on, we’ve got it,” Tom said animatedly, done waiting for Harry to get back into place, and simply dragging him through the water.

Harry laughed, steadying himself against Tom’s arm. He was out of breath, not from the physical effort but from the laughter. “Hold on,” he gasped, a couple giggles escaping him.

“If you would just stop laughing we’d be doing much better,” Tom reprimanded, though his dimples hadn’t disappeared since they’d started, laughter lines appearing in his cheeks.

“Okay, okay,” Harry said, rolling his shoulders and standing up straighter as he took a deep breath. “Let’s go.”

He jumped up again, and Tom’s hands found their place on his hips, lifting him up effortlessly. Harry steadied himself, his abs aching with the stretch, and he held his arms out at his sides, his chin held high.

“What the fuck are you two *doing*?”

Harry’s head whipped around, catching sight of Rick on the beach before both he and Tom went crashing into the water again.

They came back up laughing, though there was also some sputtering and spitting.

“Well?” Rick prompted, a grin stretched across his lips as he watched them.

“We’re doing the lift from *Dirty Dancing*,” Harry said.

“Yes, *why*?” Rick said, laughing.

“Fun,” Harry said easily, looking over at Tom. “Finished your run?”

“Yeah, it’s getting late you know, already eight,” Rick said, pointing over at the clocktower.

Harry squinted in its direction but he couldn’t make the time out properly.

Tom sighed, flicking the water. “We’d best go back in then. Get ready.”

“No, no, wait,” Rick said, “I wanna see the lift.”

“One more time?” Harry said, looking back at Tom, hoping to see his bright smile again.

He got a small happy grin in response, before he nodded, reaching out to drag him over again as if he were a ragdoll. “Okay, ready?” he asked.

Harry nodded, rolling his shoulders. They did the lift again, and he actually managed to keep his balance this time, Tom's arms never wavering as they held him up.

Rick whistled, clapping a few times.

Tom laughed, bringing Harry back down carefully, his arms wrapping around his waist to hold him steady.

"We did it!" Harry said happily, hands finding Tom's chest.

"Well done," Tom said, his eyes bright. They were so close, and the temptation to lean in was there. Harry hadn't seen his eyes so bright from so close up in a long time.

He laughed, extricating himself from Tom's hold. "I kind of wish we'd fallen back in, it was so fun."

Tom splashed him, shaking his head. "Idiot," he said fondly.

Harry grinned, before launching himself forward and tackling him back underwater. Tom grabbed hold of him and dragged him down with him. They scuffled underwater for a second, before they both came back up laughing.

"You're such an idiot," Tom laughed, heaving a breath.

"Yeah, come on," Harry said, slapping a hand on his shoulder as he walked them back to the shore.

"You're both idiots," Rick said happily, leaning down to grab their stuff. "Here, I'll get your clothes, you're soaking."

"Cheers, Rick," Harry said while Tom just waved a dismissive hand.

They made their way back to the chapel, Harry feeling oddly exposed as he walked across the grounds in his boxers while dripping wet. Tom was shivering beside him, his lips looking a bit blue around the edges.

"Tom, you go in the shower first," Harry said, smiling over at him. "You look freezing."

He nodded, his teeth chattering. "I'll get you a towel in the meantime."

Harry smiled. "Thanks," he murmured.

They got to the chapel, finding all the other boys sat around the table as they walked in.

"Congratulations on doing the lift," Theo said, grinning over at them.

"Were you watching us?" Tom asked, giving Theo a distasteful look.

Theo held his hands up innocently. "We all were," he said, as if that made it all better.

"Weirdo," Harry huffed out, laughing at the sheepish looks on the others' faces.

“What?” Theo said, looking around with wide eyes. “Hearing you both laugh like that eased my nerves.”

Tom rolled his eyes, groaning. “If oversharing was a disease you would be dead.”

“What have I said *now*?” Theo said, sounding despaired.

Harry snorted, shaking his head. “Weirdo,” he repeated, and Tom nodded beside him.

—Scene three—

By the time Harry stepped out of the shower it was almost nine o'clock. He'd waited for Tom and Rick to shower, huddled up under a towel, shivering as all his worries about the play came back. Once under the hot spray of the shower though, his whirling mind returned to a calm state. He took his time washing his hair, and perhaps even indulged in a quick wank.

The bathroom was all steamed up when he finished, and he wrapped a towel around his waist and opened the window before wiping down the mirror. He brushed his teeth quickly before picking up Rick's razor that had been left out for him.

The mirror was still foggy but he made it work, lathering his face in shaving cream and carefully scraping away any stubble with the sharp blade. When the only parts left were too tricky for him to get properly without cutting himself, he opened the bathroom door and called for Tom.

"Yeah, what is it?" he asked, appearing out of their bedroom doorway, tightening the cuffs on his wrists.

"Give us a hand will you?"

"'Course," Tom said, joining him in the small bathroom.

Harry leant back against the sink, letting Tom stand in front of him. He looked delectable, wearing simple black slacks and a black shirt. Harry thought it should be studied how he could make such simple clothes look so *good*.

"You look smart," he commented, tipping his head back a bit to look up at him. It was almost intimidating, being clothed in nothing but a towel when Tom was fully dressed.

"Thank you," he said with a genuine little smile. He picked up the razor and tilted Harry's chin back with a firm hand.

Harry gripped the sink, biting back a sound, as Tom scraped his skin with the razor. "Are you nervous? About seeing Amelia again?"

Tom hummed, hunching over to see better, eyes intent on where he cleaned Harry up. "Not nervous—apprehensive, maybe?"

"Are you happy though? To have someone come and watch you?"

Tom's lips curved up in a funny little smile as he worked. "Of course I am," he said quietly, "thank you again, by the way."

"Don't thank me," Harry said, before taking in a sharp breath as Tom scraped down his throat, his eyes squeezing shut as his back straightened out against the sink.

"Did I get you?"

“No, no,” Harry said, sounding breathless. “I just—it startled me.”

“Sorry. I think you’re done anyway, you hadn’t missed much.” Tom looked him over quickly anyway, wiping away the shaving foam for him.

Harry turned around and bent over the sink to splash his face with water. He hoped the cold water would calm the raging blush on his cheeks, but when he straightened out and looked in the mirror his cheeks were still red, the image of Tom standing behind him doing nothing to help. Pretending to check himself over in the mirror, he said, “Thanks.”

“No problem,” Tom said, a dusting of pink coating his sharp cheekbones. “Did I miss any? On me, I mean.”

Harry turned, and reached out to tilt his jaw this way and that. “Not that I can see, no.”

“You might want to put your glasses on to see better,” he teased.

Harry rolled his eyes, a smile pulling at his lips. “Piss off.” He put his glasses on anyway and checked Tom over properly. “No, you haven’t missed anywhere.”

“Perfect, thank you.”

“What time is it now?” Harry asked, towelling his hair off.

“Nine, I think. Do you want some coffee? I’m going to go down and make some.”

“Please, yeah.”

“Alright, I’ll let you get dressed then,” Tom said, drifting towards the stairs as they left the bathroom.

“Thanks,” Harry said again as he went into their room, closing the door behind himself.

He could hear the others chatting downstairs as he rifled through his wardrobe. He had no idea what to wear, but he grabbed a pair of boxers and some smart slacks. He finished drying himself and pulled his boxers on.

The chatter picked up downstairs as he stepped into his slacks. One resounding voice, unmistakable, rang out before he could even button his trousers up.

“Harry! You might want to come downstairs!” Alphard shouted from below.

But Harry was already running out of the room, shirtless, barefoot, trousers undone. He looked over the barrier, heart racing.

“There he is!” Sirius shouted as he looked up, a bark of happy laughter resounding in the library.

“Sirius!” Harry ran down the stairs at top speed, his footsteps banging against the wood. He was out of breath when he got to the library but he jumped up into Sirius’s arms as soon as he

was close enough.

“Woah Bambi, you’re not as small as you used to be!” Sirius exclaimed, taking a staggering step back, his arms wrapping around Harry’s waist.

Harry clung to him, legs wrapped around his middle. “I’ve missed you,” he mumbled into his leather jacket, a horrendous wave of emotion passing over him as tears pricked his eyes.

“I’ve missed you too, kiddo,” Sirius said, patting his back soothingly. He set him down gently, back on his two feet, but kept a firm hold on his back.

Harry was gripping the back of his jacket hard enough to scrunch the fabric up, taking in big lungfuls of the smell of him; devoid of whiskey. He pulled back after a few seconds, shoving his glasses back up his nose.

He looked at him properly, eyes raking over him. He looked healthy, his cheeks were no longer sunken in, the same going for his eyes that had regained their brightness. His toothy smile was only slightly crooked, his teeth looking healthier than they previously were. His hands didn’t hold their perpetual shake, but were firm against Harry’s arms. His hair was long and lucious, no longer scraggly and tangled. He was still thin, but not skinny.

“You look brilliant,” Harry said in a breath.

Sirius laughed, bright and loud. “You look like you need to get dressed,” he teased, and Harry remembered he was severely underdressed. “Just kidding, you look great too, kiddo.”

“Though you really should put some clothes on, Harry,” Hermione said from behind him.

He whirled around, having barely registered that his friends were there, as well as Remus. He grinned bright and left Sirius to give them all a hug. “I’ve missed you so much,” he murmured as he held onto them.

“We missed you too, mate,” Ron said, roughing up his hair.

“We really did, Harry,” Hermione said, holding onto him tightly.

“It’s good to see you, kiddo,” Remus said happily, patting him on the back.

Harry pulled back, beaming at them. “You’re so early,” he laughed, turning back to Sirius.

“I couldn’t wait to see you!” Sirius said animatedly. “We had breakfast at the inn but you know me, I couldn’t wait around for another hour.”

“He’s been up since five this morning,” Remus whispered conspiratorially, grinning.

“Yeah, came banging on our door and everything,” Ron grumbled.

Harry laughed, so incredibly happy to have them back. “I really should get dressed,” he said, a cool breeze rushing over his exposed skin.

“I’ll come with you,” Sirius said excitedly, looking up at the first floor. “I’m dying to see what this place looks like nowadays.”

“Calm down a second,” Remus said, setting a hand on Sirius’s shoulder. “Maybe introductions should be made, hm?”

“‘Course,” Harry said quickly, spinning around to look at all the other boys.

“And maybe button up your trousers, Harry, at the least,” Hermione said, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Oh, yeah,” he said guiltily, zipping and buttoning his trousers quickly.

“You’re no fun, Hermione,” Theo said, pouting over at Harry.

“I’ll take it that's Theo?” Sirius said pointedly. “The Nott kid?”

“I see my legacy precedes me,” Theo said proudly.

“It’s not a legacy to be proud of,” Harry sniped, rolling his eyes. “But yes, that is Theo.”

Sirius grinned at him, sticking his hand out. “You were brilliant in *Hamlet*.”

“Oh, thank you,” Theo said, looking flustered by a genuine compliment as he shook his hand.

“This is Richard Lestrange,” Harry introduced.

“Just Rick,” he said, holding his hand out which Sirius took.

“Lestrange, hm?” Sirius said appraisingly. “Your mum’s a delight to work with.”

“She’ll be happy to hear it.”

“This is Gaspar Avery,” Harry said, gesturing to him.

“Big fan of your parents’ work,” Sirius said earnestly, shaking his hand.

“Thank you,” Gaspar said, managing to not stutter despite his wide-eyed look. “I’m a big fan of yours.”

“Who isn’t?” Sirius said with a wink.

Harry rolled his eyes while Gaspar almost swooned. “This is Abraxas Malfoy,” he cut in.

“Oh, the Malfoys, very intimidating bunch,” Sirius said, shaking his hand. “But very nice people.”

Abraxas smiled, nodding in thanks, as he said, “Lovely to meet you.”

“Alphard, obviously,” Harry said happily.

“Oh, we’ve already met,” Sirius said playfully.

“It’s good to see you Uncle Sirius,” Alphard said, giving him a hug. “I really missed you.”

“Me too, kid,” Sirius said, patting his hair down. “Tell me your parents aren’t coming.”

Alphard laughed, pulling back. “They are, unfortunately. Sorry.”

“Fuck,” Sirius mumbled, cringing.

“Just for today though, they’re leaving tonight,” Alphard assured, though there was a tinge of sadness to his voice.

“Are they really?” Harry asked, frowning.

Alphard turned to him, nodding. “They have a thing, I think.”

“Wankers,” Sirius huffed. “I’ll be cheering you on tomorrow night as well, don’t worry.”

Alphard’s face lit up in a shy smile.

Harry smiled at the scene, turning to the last person he had to introduce, who was incidentally the one he was most nervous about. His heart lodged in his throat as he caught Tom’s apprehensive eye. “And this is Tom,” he said, turning to Sirius, his voice sounding funny, “Tom Riddle.”

Sirius froze for a second as his eyes landed on Tom, before he held his hand out resolutely. “Lovely to meet you, Tom. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Tom smiled, one of those charming smiles that never failed to make anyone feel off kilter, as he took his hand. “It’s good to finally meet you properly.”

It was like worlds colliding, as if everything in Harry came crashing down before building itself back up. He watched them shake hands as if in slow motion.

“Somehow you’re more good looking than I’d expected,” Sirius laughed, letting go of Tom’s hand. He turned and gave Harry a thumbs up, trying to seem discreet, though everyone in the room saw.

Harry’s face *burned*, and he was sure it was spreading down to his—still very exposed—chest.

But Tom just laughed, the sound so reminiscent of the laughter that rang across the lake that morning that it put Harry at ease. “Well, you’re as handsome as your magazine photos,” he said unflinchingly. Harry’s eyebrows flew up at the brashness.

Sirius chuckled, giving Tom an appraising look. Harry could tell immediately that Sirius liked him, despite knowing very well what had happened in May. “I should hope so,” he ended up saying.

Tom smiled at him, before turning to Harry again. “I got your coffee,” he said, flicking the mug on the table, the sound of his nail hitting the ceramic making a noise.

“Thanks,” Harry managed to say weakly. It hit him, quite abruptly, that Tom was trying to *please* Sirius, as if trying to win his favour. He felt a bit faint with it all.

“Right, show me that room of yours then,” Sirius said, clapping his hands together. “And let’s find you a shirt to wear.”

Harry took a breath, nodding as he gestured for Sirius to follow him. “You all know each other,” he said, turning to all the others, “we’ll let you catch up.”

Ignoring the way Theo immediately sidled up to Hermione’s side, Harry hurried up the stairs with Sirius in tow.

“Is this your room with Alphard then?” Sirius asked, looking around once the door was shut.

“What? No, I share this room with Tom.”

Sirius whipped around, eyes wide. “Since when do you share with Tom?”

“Since Christmas, did I not tell you?”

“Must have slipped your mind,” Sirius said, a bitten back smirk tugging at his lips. He turned away from Harry, picking up a photo of his parents on the desk, smiling at it fondly.

In the meantime Harry found a pair of socks and sat on his bed to put them on.

Sirius came over and sat across from him on Tom’s bed. “How are you feeling about the play?”

Sitting up, Harry shrugged. “Nervous.”

“I bet you are,” Sirius said, looking around.

“How are you doing?”

Sirius looked back at him. “Really well,” he said earnestly. “I’ve been so excited to come and see you that it’s made the process a lot easier, and things have been going great with Moony. I’d forgotten how happy I made him.”

Harry smiled. “That’s great, Sirius. I’m really happy for you.”

“Thank you,” he said, eyes dropping to his knees. “You’ve been amazing, and I’m really sorry—”

“Ah, ah, we’re not doing apologies. As long as you’re alright, I don’t care to hear it.”

Sirius grinned up at him, eyes raking around the room again. “That Tom, eh?”

“We’re not talking about it,” Harry said quickly, feeling his cheeks heat up.

“Hermione told me more about what happened in May,” he said gently. “How are you doing?”

Harry groaned, biting at his thumb. “It—hurts,” he swallowed, “but we’re better now. We’re friends again. Well, we never stopped being friends, it’s just that I couldn’t really spend time with him for a while.”

“You still have feelings for him?”

Harry nodded. “Bit of an understatement,” he said with a laugh.

“Ah,” Sirius said, nodding in understanding, “you’re in love with him.”

Harry sighed, scratching at the back of his head. “Yeah.”

“Yeah, that’s rough.”

“Oh, thanks a lot, Sirius,” Harry said sarcastically.

Laughing, Sirius reached over and pinched his arm. “Don’t get pissy with me.” Harry laughed, batting his hand away. “He doesn’t know what he’s missing out on, though.”

“He does,” Harry sighed, leaning back on his hands. “He knows, don’t worry.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m sure Hermione told you,” Harry said, frowning. “You know, he told me that he fancied me, kind of, but he didn’t want to jeopardise his career, or our friendship, because of it.”

Sirius frowned. “Does he know how you feel?”

Harry shrugged. “Dunno, I’m assuming so. Everyone else does.”

“Sounds a bit to me like he panicked,” Sirius said with a shrug. “I bet if you’d have told him how you felt then things might have gone differently.”

“Yeah, well, I was hoping my tongue down his throat would convey that message.”

Sirius scrunched his nose up, chuckling. “T.M.I, kid,” he laughed. “But that’s not necessarily true.”

“It’s in the past anyway,” Harry waved off. “We can sit here and theorise over this and that, believe me, I have, but it won’t change anything.”

“I just want to see you happy, Haz.”

“I know,” Harry said, softening. “And I am, don’t worry about that.”

Sirius offered him a kind smile, before tapping Tom’s bedsheets and standing up. “Let’s find you a shirt, then.”

“That’s Tom’s wardrobe, Sirius.”

Sirius emerged with a raised eyebrow. “And why does *Tom* have your dad’s ABBA t-shirt?”

Harry jumped up, snatching the fabric from Sirius’s hold. “I let him wear it—sometimes,” he said quietly, cheeks burning.

“Oh, you’ve got it bad, Bambi,” he said, going over to Harry’s wardrobe.

Huffing, Harry shoved the t-shirt back into Tom’s wardrobe and closed the door on it.

“What about this?” Sirius said, holding out the sheer shirt.

Harry hummed. “I’m not feeling that today, I don’t think.”

“Okay—” Sirius turned back into the wardrobe, *uhm-ing and ah-ing* as he flicked through items of clothing— “oh, how about this?”

It was a plain black shirt, one that tended to really bring Harry’s muscles out. “I’ll be matching with Tom if I wear that.”

Sirius grinned. “All the more reason to.”

“I dunno, Sirius, that’s a bit of a statement,” Harry said, picking at the shirt.

“You’re co-stars, aren’t you? That’s what you told me. It’s in theme, don’t worry.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Sirius assured, pulling the shirt off the hanger. “Don’t overthink it.”

“Alright.” Harry slipped the shirt onto his shoulders, buttoning it up. It was a bit tighter than it used to be, and he felt a tinge of pride with that knowledge.

“Tuck it into your trousers.”

Harry did as told, unfastening his trousers to stuff the shirt in before doing them back up.

“You look good, kid,” Sirius said, fixing his collar for him.

“Cheers, Sirius.”

“When did you start wearing this?” he asked, touching the outline of the waist chain through Harry’s shirt.

“A few months ago,” he replied absentmindedly, tightening the cuffs on the shirt.

“Looks good on you,” he said with an approving nod.

“Thanks,” Harry said with a grin, pushing his glasses back up his nose.

“Shall we go back down then? Wouldn’t do to miss out on the party.”

Harry grabbed his arm as he went to leave, feeling antsy. “Will you be okay with your sister?”

Sirius smiled at him. “Her and my cousin who is also my brother-in-law? Yeah, I’ll be fine, Haz. Don’t worry about it, I won’t kick up a fuss. For your sake. I’ve already been briefed by Remus.”

Harry let go of him, grinning. “Alright then, let’s go.”

When they got back downstairs everyone was sitting around the table, mugs of coffee in front of them. Remus was beside Gaspar who was talking to him animatedly about composing music for the play, if Harry wasn’t mistaken. Ron was sitting across from Abraxas who was showing him card tricks, and Hermione was next to Theo talking quietly.

“Oi, Moony,” Sirius said as they sat in two open seats between Tom and Alphard, “these two have got mine and James’s room.”

“No way?” Remus said, looking between Harry and Tom.

“You didn’t tell me that,” Harry said, frowning at Sirius.

“I’m telling you now,” Sirius grinned, “you’ve got James’s bed, by the way.”

“Oh, that means Tom’s got Sirius’s,” Remus said, cringing apologetically in Tom’s direction. “Might not want to know anything about that, actually.”

“I cannot emphasise how much I’d rather not,” Tom confirmed, making Harry laugh.

Sirius barked out a laugh, his palm hitting the table. “That’s probably for the best.”

Tom scrunched up his nose, a smile teasing at his lips. “Your coffee’s cold,” he said, turning to Harry.

He shrugged, taking it gratefully anyway. “It doesn’t matter. Thanks again.”

Tom hummed, eyeing him. “That shirt looks good, I don’t think I’ve seen it before.”

Harry looked down, feeling the tips of his ears heat up knowing Sirius and Remus were listening in. “Sirius picked it out. It’s an old one.”

“Looks good.”

“Thanks.” He was definitely blushing, his insides curling up as he avoided Sirius’s eyes. He took a drink of coffee before tapping out a cigarette. “D’you have a lighter? I left mine upstairs.”

“Here,” Tom said, fishing his lighter out of his pocket and flicking the stone to light Harry’s cigarette for him. “Can I pinch one? I’ve run out.”

“Already?” Harry said, catching the cigarette between his fingers, blowing out smoke. “Help yourself.”

“I only got two packs last week,” Tom said by way of explanation.

“What’s the plan for today then, lads?” Sirius asked, dragging his attention away from Harry and Tom. Harry actually felt the weight of his stare lift from his shoulders as he looked away.

“Er—we’re having lunch with family and friends,” Abraxas said, halting his card trick. “I think we have a last rehearsal planned for five this evening, and then the show is at nine.”

“Do we really have to do a whole run-through of the play?” Theo asked, turning to Tom. “We’ve done it a million times.”

“We have to make sure everything is set up properly, to avoid technical errors,” Tom said simply. “We don’t have to get all dressed up if you’d rather not.”

“Oh good,” Gaspar said, reaching over the table to grab Harry’s pack of cigarettes and taking one. “We’d best not do it with costumes because it would be just our luck that we’d ruin one.”

“Yeah, imagine if Tom came in his trousers or something,” Theo said, completely unprompted.

Tom tutted, clicking his tongue in annoyance. “Behave, idiot.”

Theo snickered, looking at Hermione for approval who just gave him a disapproving look.

“How did your finals go, Hermione?” Harry asked, leaning on the table to look beyond Tom.

She sighed, shrugging. “I think they went well, I’m waiting for results now.”

“Political science, right?” Abraxas asked curiously.

“Yes, I’m looking to go on to do a Doctorate.”

“Wow, that’s so cool, I could never,” Gaspar said, eyes wide. “It sounds so complicated.”

“It is,” Hermione said honestly, tucking some hair behind her ear, “but I’m very passionate about it, so it’s worth the work I have to put in.”

“I would have liked to study political science, I think, or something along those lines,” Tom said out of the blue.

“Really?” Hermione said, looking interested.

“*What*?” Theo said, looking unconvinced. He went ignored.

“Yes, I would’ve liked to be a lawyer, or a judge maybe. Or simply a political figure.”

Harry's head ended up in his hand, propped up with his elbow on the table as he watched them talk, eyes trained on Tom, fascinated by this new information he was uncovering. He sounded so smart as he spoke with Hermione.

"This is so interesting," Tom was saying, "would you mind showing me your notes on the subject? Or a book recommendation? I would like to learn more."

Hermione's eyes lit up, hair falling into her eyes as she nodded frantically. "I would love to! It's such a multifaceted problem, and you'll see when I show you my notes how many layers there actually are to it—"

A timid knock sounded at the door, and Harry was jostled out of his mindless admiration.

"It's only half nine," Theo said, frowning, "does no one know how to be on time anymore?"

"Oi," Harry said, getting up and rounding the table, flicking Theo's ear on his way past, "behave."

He got to the door, seeing the faint trace of a lone figure through the thick distorted stained glass. He opened it, revealing a nervous looking woman; she was short, a head shorter than him, with mousy brown hair held back by a head scarf, big brown eyes, wide with apprehension. Her cheeks were coated in pink, and she was wearing an almost old fashioned looking dress, lacy at the collar, and long, only cinched at the waist. It was all black, and it looked good, as if she was straight out of a movie. She was worryingly thin but she carried it well.

"Hello," she said, her voice soft with an underlying note of authority, "am I correct in believing this is the chapel? Where the seventh year theatre students live?"

Harry shook himself out of his stunned silence, pushing his glasses back up his nose. "Yes," he said quickly, "yes, of course, you must be Amelia."

"Oh," she looked taken aback at having been recognised, "I am, and you must be one of Tom's friends?" She was so soft spoken, it reminded Harry quite painfully of his mum, how silky her voice used to be.

"Harry," he said, still feeling a bit stunned, "I'm Harry."

Amelia's eyes widened, and she clasped her hands in front of her. "Gosh, you're Harry? Wow, thank you so much, it's such an honour to be able to be here!"

"Please, it was my pleasure. Come in, I'm sure Tom's dying to see you."

She followed him in gratefully, her eyes lighting up as she saw Tom.

"Amelia," Tom said, standing up. He squashed his cigarette in the ashtray as if he'd been burned by it.

"Tommy!" she exclaimed, going over to him, a bounce in her step as her kitten heels clacked against the wooden floor.

Tom, like everyone else in the room, seemed shocked when she wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug. He reciprocated awkwardly, tapping her shoulder.

"*This* is Amelia?" Theo asked, looking gobsmacked. "Why the actual *fuck* did you not say anything, Tom? We had no idea you had someone coming!"

Tom ignored him, picking at the sleeve of Amelia's dress instead. "What the fuck are you wearing?" he asked, amusement dancing in his voice.

She pulled back, holding him at arm's length as she grinned up at him, batting his hand away. "Don't be mean, I had to wear my best dress, try and fit in, you know?"

"You look like you're going to a funeral," he deadpanned.

She laughed, bright and wonderful. "You're still as awful as always."

"I wouldn't be me if I wasn't," he murmured back, cocking his head to the side as he regarded her. "You look lovely," he said, giving her a genuine smile, "thank you for coming."

"Oh," Amelia said, her face falling, "oh, shut up, you awful boy, of course I'd come!"

Tom just smiled at her, unphased by her words.

Sirius stood up, putting an end to everyone's silent open-mouthed staring. "Who is this then, Tom? Your sister, I presume?" he asked, winking in Amelia's direction with a charming smile.

"Oh, good God, Sirius Black," Amelia said, staggering back against Tom. She shook her head, swallowing. "I'm sorry," she amended, "I've never met a celebrity, and I'm quite a fan of your work."

"That's alright, love," Sirius said easily, "by the end of the day you'll hate us all, I'm sure." Amelia laughed lightly, looking more at ease. "Amelia then, is it?"

"Yes," she said, taking Sirius's hand in hers tentatively, "I'm er—" she looked up at Tom in question.

"She was one of my caretakers at the orphanage where I grew up," Tom said easily, his hands on her shoulders. "She was my favourite."

She grinned, looking very pleased with the admission. "I helped him audition for the school," she added proudly, letting go of Sirius's hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Amelia," Sirius said sincerely.

"Oh, you too," she said, looking a bit flustered.

"This is my partner, Remus Lupin," he went on, gesturing to Remus. "We're here for Harry, who's my Godson, and we brought along the girl and the redhead who are his best friends."

“It’s nice to meet you,” Remus said kindly.

“Hello,” Amelia said, looking at Remus with wide eyes. “It’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

Tom hummed behind her, moving her by her shoulders. “The others are my classmates, Theo who you know of, Alphard Black, Gaspar Avery, Richard Lestrange, and Abraxas Malfoy. And this is Harry, of course.”

“Gosh, hello,” Amelia said, fussing over her dress nervously as everyone echoed the greeting. “I’m a bit early, aren’t I?” she asked anxiously, looking up at Tom.

“It’s fine,” he assured. “Harry’s lot got here ages ago.”

“What can I say?” Sirius said, holding his hands up. “I couldn’t wait to see my kid.”

Amelia beamed at him. “I have to admit I was the same, I couldn’t wait to see Tommy again.”

“It’s just Tom.”

“Oh, you’ll always be little Tommy to me, love,” she said, looking up at him adoringly. “God, I can’t get over how healthy and grown up you look.”

“This is fascinating,” Theo said, getting up and holding out a hand to Amelia who took it. He bent down and kissed her knuckles gently, making her eyes widen, looking flustered. “I’ve always wondered where Tom got his charm from.”

“Ignore him,” Tom said while everyone else laughed, “he’s clinically insane.”

“Theo is it?” Amelia said. “I have heard a lot about you.”

“All good I hope?”

“Not at all,” Amelia teased goodnaturedly.

Theo laughed, sitting back down. “You must tell us embarrassing stories about Tom’s childhood, he’s very tight lipped about it all.”

“Amelia, take my seat next to Tom,” Harry said from the other side of the table. “I’ll go sit with Ron before Abraxas ropes him into gambling.”

“Oh thank you, Harry dear,” she said, smiling at him as she sat down. “And I don’t know, Tom was a very odd child but not particularly embarrassing.”

“I’m all ears,” Theo said eagerly, all the others listening in with rapt attention.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Tom said pointedly. “Half the stories she’d come up with are probably from other kids anyway.”

“Oh, you terrible boy,” Amelia laughed, hitting his arm. “I don’t think I could ever confuse your stories for other children, you did stand out.” Tom grumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose while Amelia hummed in thought. “He was very quiet,” she said eventually, “even as a baby, he rarely cried and he demanded little to no attention. He was one of the first kids I looked after when I first started working at the orphanage. As a toddler though he quickly got on Mrs. Cole’s, the main Matron’s, bad side. He had a nasty tendency of winding the other kids up.”

“It was their own fault,” Tom interrupted defensively, “they were all idiots, and Mrs. Cole never believed me.”

Amelia laughed fondly. “You were a bit of a mean child, darlin’.”

Tom groaned, slumping in his seat.

“What did he do?” Theo asked, excited.

“Well,” Amelia said, picking at the sleeve of her dress, “there was that time you abandoned Amy and Dennis in that cave by the seaside, we had to get the coastguard involved to get them back. *And* you refused to tell us where they were for the longest time.”

“They could’ve got back if they hadn't been cowards. They got there, didn’t they? They could've got back,” Tom said petulantly.

“What about when you filled Eric Whalley’s bed with garden snakes?” Amelia said pointedly. “Or set Billy Stubb’s rabbit free?”

Tom was blushing furiously, sinking further into his seat. Harry had never actually seen him embarrassed, it was wholly endearing. “*I* didn’t do that.”

“Oh, please, Tom,” Amelia said, an amused smile playing on her lips, “we’re a bit past lying, aren’t we?”

Tom rolled his eyes. “Yes, well, if you’d have done something about them annoying *me*, I wouldn’t have had to take things into my own hands.”

“You were all impossible to keep up with,” Amelia said apologetically. “But you just didn’t get along with the other kids, on your own you were quite lovely.” She turned back to the rest of them who were all stunned by the revelations. “He was always a very intelligent child, well-spoken, smart, years beyond his level. I always thought it was a right shame we didn’t have the means to help him out a bit in life, which is why I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to help him audition.”

“He was a weirdo, is what you’re saying,” Theo said, looking unimpressed.

Amelia laughed. “I suppose, yes, a bit. Oh, don’t take it the wrong way, Tommy, even you have to admit you were a bit strange.” Tom rolled his eyes again. “*But*,” she went on, “he could be very sweet too. I remember he must have been about five, and he never took part in the activities we put out for kids like drawing, or games, or anything, but one day he came up

to me after having spent the day holed up in his room, and he gave me a drawing. It was the only one he ever gave me, or anyone else, and it was a drawing of a snake. It meant a lot because snakes were his favourite animal, so in a way he was giving me something he loved. I still have that drawing tacked up in my room, it's my favourite."

"I can't believe you still have it," Tom said, rolling his eyes, "that's so sad."

Harry smiled, his heart racing, feeling a bit choked up on what he was feeling. He could see right through Tom, he didn't find it sad, or pathetic, in fact he was infinitely pleased that Amelia had kept it.

"You would find it sad," Amelia said with a laugh, "but it meant a lot to me."

"I think it's adorable," Sirius said brightly from beside Amelia. He'd been listening with undivided attention, and Harry knew he was trying to understand Tom a bit better. "You know, I remember the first time Harry ever game me a drawing—"

"You cried," Remus said, an amused smile on his lips.

"I did," Sirius said, grinning. "It was such a special moment though. I mean, I can't quite say that the drawing was *good*, it didn't really look like anything at all, but it meant a lot to me."

"Thanks a lot," Harry piped up from the other side of the table.

"Well, Bambi, you were only two," Sirius said, turning back towards Amelia. "You know, Harry was a weird kid too."

"Was he?" Amelia said, amused.

"Oh, please tell us, Uncle Sirius," Alphard said excitedly.

"Please don't," Harry implored just as Ron snorted beside him, earning himself a punch to the shoulder.

Sirius laughed, revelling in the attention. "Can anyone guess what Harry wanted to be when he grew up?"

Remus snorted into his hand, the memory clearly coming back to him. Harry couldn't remember, but he didn't like the look in Sirius's eye.

"No," Tom said unexpectedly, "what did he want to be?"

Sirius grinned. "He wanted to be a stripper."

"For fuck's sake, Sirius!" Harry exclaimed before he could stop himself, while the others laughed raucously at his expense. He'd completely forgotten that brief desire of his as a child but it all came crashing back; the retrospectively awkward conversation, the dance routines he'd made up.

Amelia was giggling behind her hand, eyes bright.

It was Tom though, who turned wide eyes on Harry, so full of mirth and interest. “Did you really?” he asked brightly, the kind of unfiltered expression on his face that rarely left their bedroom these days.

Harry stopped short for a second, caught up in the look in Tom’s eyes. “I did,” he admitted quietly, a self-deprecating laugh escaping him as he scratched the back of his head self-consciously.

“He was only five or so,” Sirius went on, undeterred. “I think it was me who let the word stripper slip, and, well, you know how kids are,” he said, looking at Amelia, “he wouldn’t drop the bloody subject. So I explained that strippers dance while taking their clothes off, and Harry was completely taken with the concept!”

“He was at that age where it was difficult to make him keep his shirt on,” Remus supplied.

“He had routines and everything!” Sirius exclaimed, far too amused.

“It’s not too late to have a career change, Harry,” Theo said, looking at him with unbridled glee. “I’d come to every one of your shows, slip as many notes as you’d want in your pants as long as you gave me a lapdance.”

Tom slapped Theo upside the head, an amused smile making the corners of his mouth tick up. “Behave,” he chastised.

“Ow,” Theo complained, rubbing at his head, “you know, you lost the privilege of knight in shining armour.”

“Theo!” Alphard hissed in reprimand from the other end of the table.

“What?” Theo said, looking around, first at Tom who was pinching the bridge of his nose, jaw clenched, then Harry who had gone bright red, sinking a bit lower in his seat. “Too soon?” he asked with a wince.

“Too soon,” Alphard grumbled.

“Definitely too soon,” Abraxas added with a pointed look Theo’s way.

“His knighthood has been revoked, but it *could* be restored, potentially,” Theo said, not nearly as cryptic as he was hoping to be.

“Theo shut up,” Tom snapped.

Harry cringed, ignoring the silent glaring match going on between the two of them. He looked back towards Sirius who was looking at him pensively. “How did the journey go, anyway? I don’t think I asked.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow. “Good save, kid,” he mumbled.

“Oh, you know, Sirius almost killed us,” Remus said airily. “I took over after the near death experience.”

“Naturally,” Harry said.

“I drove your car, mate, hope you don’t mind,” Ron said from beside him.

“Oh, did you?”

“Yeah, we thought you might want to drive back down to London.”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” Harry said, pleased with the prospect.

“Harry!” Alphard called around a gasp. “You never said you had your licence!”

Harry’s eyes flitted over to Tom’s, and a grin broke out across his face.

“What did I tell you?” Tom said pointedly. “Vultures.”

Harry laughed, shaking his head in disbelief. “I suppose it just never came up.”

“Where did you come from, Amelia?” Sirius asked curiously. “I do discern a bit of a cockney accent, if I’m not mistaken. Don’t tell me you came all the way from London,” he added dramatically.

Amelia smiled, nodding. “I did, I took the train from King’s Cross.”

“What?” Sirius said, looking at Harry sternly. “Why didn’t you say anything? We could’ve brought her along easily!”

Harry rolled his eyes. “No offence, but Amelia doesn’t know you, and you’re in the bad habit of scaring the shit out of everyone who gets in a car with you.”

“Yeah,” Ron piped up, “your road rage is out of control, mate.”

“You, zip it,” Sirius said, motioning to Ron. “And Remus could’ve driven.”

Remus shook his head, sharing a look with Gaspar who looked beyond pleased to be in on the joke. “How about I drive us back?” he offered. “You’re welcome to join us, Amelia. God knows trains are a pain.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to be a bother,” she said quickly, looking taken aback. “And how will Tom get back? I don’t mind us taking the train together, Tommy.”

“Er—I won’t be leaving ‘til the second,” Tom said, crossing his arms. “I suppose you need to get back to work before that?”

Amelia deflated a bit. “I do, I had to bargain with Mrs. Cole for the time I could get as it is.”

Tom rolled his eyes. “I bet she was only difficult because you were coming to see me.”

Amelia hummed. “Maybe, you are in her bad books, you know?”

“Yes, well, she’s in mine.”

“I bet she is,” Amelia said with a giggle.

“How’s this,” Sirius interrupted, “Amelia, you come back with us on the first, Ron and Hermione you come with us too, and then Harry and Tom can come down together on the second.”

Harry could clearly see what Sirius was doing, but the prospect of a long car drive with Tom sounded like a dream come true so he couldn’t argue.

“Wait—” Theo said, frowning— “Tom, where are you going after school’s finished?”

Harry, to his horror, realised it was something he hadn’t even thought to think of. His horror only grew when a certain look passed over Tom’s face, the kind of look that meant someone had touched on a subject he really didn’t want to talk about.

“With me, of course.” The words were out of his mouth before he’d even had time to think them, before Tom had even thought to answer. Everyone turned to look at him, wide eyes trained on him from every direction, but only Tom’s caught his eye. Wide, disbelieving, *hopeful*. “Right?” Harry added uncertainly, giving Tom the best smile he could muster.

When the silence stretched for a second too long, Harry swallowed. “I mean,” he said, feeling a stupid rant coming along, “we’ll have to stay at Sirius’s for a while, as long as you don’t mind, Sirius. You know, it’s just time for us to get on our feet, and I mean, I have mum and dad’s inheritance, so really we’d only need to stay for a few weeks while we looked for something else, and—I mean, that’s if you even *want* to, I just kind of assumed that would be okay—”

“Jesus Christ,” Ron mumbled from beside him, stifling a laugh. It cut Harry right off, and he took a sharp breath, cheeks burning.

Tom was just as flustered, the tips of his ears pink. “Yes,” he cleared his throat, “I mean, as long as Sirius would be alright with it, of course. That would be…agreeable.”

Relief washed over Harry, and he took a steadying breath.

“Fucking hell,” Sirius said, looking between them. “Of course you can both come.”

“Okay, great,” Harry said, sweating anxiously at what he’d just committed himself to. “We’ll drive down together then.”

“Fine—brilliant,” Tom said, frowning at himself.

“I suppose I can accept your offer then,” Amelia said, breaking the partly awkward, partly stunned silence.

“Great,” Remus said happily, “how are you lot getting back?”

“Parents, probably,” Theo said, “so we’ll be leaving on the first as well.”

“Rick, you’re still taking me, right?” Alphard said. “Or if you can’t, I suppose I can always go back with Harry and Tom.”

“I can still take you, don’t worry,” Rick replied. “Wouldn’t want to third wheel for so long if I were you.”

“Oh,” Amelia said suddenly, “oh silly me,” she laughed to herself, shaking her head. “I hadn’t realised you and Harry were, you know, *together*, Tom, why didn’t you say?”

Tom, who had been staring off into space, a bit like Harry had been, looked like he couldn’t take much more of whatever *this* was. He looked at Amelia sharply, his inhale audible across the silent table. “We’re not.”

“Easy mistake,” Theo cut in, saving Amelia the awkwardness, “we’ve all made it. Even them!”

Alphard gasped at Theo’s words but he snorted a second later, trying to cover it up. “I’m sorry, Harry,” he said quickly, the giggles hitting him, “but that was quite funny.”

Before long all their friends were laughing at Theo’s poor excuse of a joke. Harry rolled his eyes but huffed a laugh too, finding them ridiculous.

Hermione slapped Theo’s arm. “You really shouldn’t laugh about it.”

“Leave it, ‘mione,” Harry said, rubbing his eyes under his glasses. “He’s an idiot.”

“No, you’re right, Hermione,” Theo said, as sincerely as he could through his unconvincing laughs. “I apologise.”

Whether Theo’s apology was genuine or not, they couldn’t linger on it. The buzz of multiple voices chatting in the distance filtered through the front door that Harry had left open, letting in the summer air.

The whole table seemed to sober up, Alphard most of all, whose smile dropped as he straightened his back unconsciously.

As figures started to appear in the doorway, they all got up from their seats, and Harry found himself retreating to the back of the room with Sirius, Remus, Tom, Amelia, Hermione, and Ron while parents reunited with their children.

Harry watched as Theo jumped into his sister’s arms, his mum not far behind, while his dad squeezed his shoulder affectionately. Rick was showered in affection by his parents and his brother. Abraxas fell into his mother’s arms, delighted to see her again while his dad looked on with a bright smile. Gaspar was sandwiched between his parents who looked thrilled to see him.

And Alphard—well, Alphard looked like he was holding back tears as he watched their classmates greet their parents, while *his* parents just stood next to him, nodding once in greeting.

Harry had seen Walburga and Orion Black before, in passing, but they were just as severe and austere as he remembered them being. Orion was a grave looking man, who looked incapable of smiling. He was shorter than his wife, and plumper around the middle. He looked like the typical villain in a film, which was usually his go-to role in cinema. Walburga, on the other hand, was tall and skinny, a lot like Alphard. Her face was pale and gaunt, black hair slicked back in a severe bun. Her nose was long, and she made a point of looking down it at everyone she came across. She was older than Sirius, and it was evident in the sharp lines of her forehead.

Harry could recognise Sirius in her, in all of them, in fact, but it was his boyishness that set him apart, that which made him handsome. Alphard retained it a bit, looking more like Sirius than his own father.

From beside him, Sirius ran a hand down his face, taking a deep breath. His eyes were fixed on his sister and nephew too, and he looked livid.

“Come on, let’s go say hello,” Remus said, a hand on Sirius’s shoulder.

“Not to them,” Sirius hissed back.

“No, but you want to see Lorraine, don’t you?”

Sirius grumbled but eventually nodded. “I do,” he mumbled, following Remus off to the other side of the chapel, keeping a wide berth between him and his sister.

“Christopher is here again, Harry, see,” Hermione whispered from behind him.

Both he and Tom turned around. Harry frowned at her, unable to decipher the look in her eyes. “Yeah,” he said, confused, “I’ll go say hello after.”

She hummed, and Harry knew her well enough to know that she was carefully avoiding looking at Tom. “Maybe you’ll feel like taking him up on his offer this time?”

She framed it like an innocent question, but Harry understood what it was, and he took a sharp breath, stilling, suddenly highly aware of every centimetre that separated him from Tom. He cleared his throat, trying to retain his composure.

He realised, quite abruptly, that he *could*. It wouldn’t be quite fair on Chris, and he knew he wouldn’t actually do it, but he *could* if he wanted to. Technically, he didn’t owe Tom anything. He was still in love with him, but that wouldn’t go anywhere.

Trying for casual, he shrugged, and said, “Maybe.”

He was sure he didn’t imagine the intake of breath beside him, and if the look in Hermione’s eye was anything to go by, he was right. She smirked at him, her eyes glimmering before turning back to Ron and directing them towards Theo’s family.

Harry looked up at Tom, giving him a smile. “We’d best go say hello too,” he said to him and Amelia, “though I’d avoid that part of the room,” he whispered conspiratorially, gesturing vaguely to the side of the room the Blacks had decided to haunt.

Amelia smiled at him, looking a bit overwhelmed.

“If you need anything Amelia, don’t hesitate to ask, or help yourself,” Harry told her.

“Oh, thank you, Harry dear.”

He smiled at her again before taking off. He started with the Averys, greeting them kindly. He thanked them for coming, and praised Gaspar’s musical contributions to the play, because parents loved that sort of thing.

He got to the Malfoys next, feeling the strange urge to *bow* to them, which he repressed. They were very intimidating, and they had the uncanny ability to make anyone feel severely underdressed.

He found the Notts after, where Tom and Amelia had ended up too. Mrs. Nott was as lovely and bubbly as the last time Harry had seen her, and she was eager to ask questions, trying to pry details of the play out of them. Theo’s sister, Talia, was lovely too, and Harry chatted with her for a couple minutes.

He finally got to the Lestranges, where Sirius was still essentially hiding, periodically casting furtive glances to the other side of the room.

“Harry!” Chris exclaimed loudly, and Harry couldn’t help but notice how it caught Tom’s attention.

“Hiya, Chris,” he said jovially, slapping their hands together as they pulled each other into a quick, familiar embrace, topped off with the trademark slap on the shoulder. Harry still couldn’t believe he was on such good terms with his teenage hero.

“How’ve you been, mate? Keeping in shape I can see.”

Harry laughed, grinning at him. “Yeah, your brother’s been dragging me to the gym.”

“He can lift as much as me!” Rick exclaimed boisterously. “Can you believe that?”

Chris laughed, roughing up his brother’s hair. “That’s impressive for Harry, not much for you.”

“Piss off,” Rick said, punching his brother’s arm.

Harry grinned at the display. “I’m good though,” he said to Chris. “How are you? Training, I’d imagine.”

“Yeah,” Chris said, his crooked grin in place. His teeth were still wonky from too many hits, and his nose bumpy. He was still very handsome. “Revving up for this season, should be mint.”

“I can’t wait to come and see you play,” Harry said excitedly.

“I’ll be seeing you play first,” Chris said, elbowing Harry’s side conspiratorially. “Any information to give out?”

“My lips are sealed,” Harry said cheekily.

“Oi Harry,” Sirius said, stifling a laugh behind his hand, “I didn’t know you were so friendly with the poster on your wall.”

Harry’s cheeks burned instantly. “Oh, piss off, Sirius,” he gritted out through his teeth.

Chris only laughed, a strong hand landing on Harry’s shoulder.

“So this is the orphan Potter boy.”

Instantly, the very air in the library seemed to turn frigid at the sound of Walburga’s voice. They turned towards her slowly, Harry feeling completely thrown off kilter. Orion was standing at her side, and Alphard, always poised, bright and kind, was bright red, shrinking in on himself. Harry hated to see it.

“Ah, Walburga,” Sirius said, a muscle in his jaw ticking as he plastered on an obviously fake smile, “nice of you to descend from your witch’s cave to join us.”

She smirked, haughty and cruel. “Sirius. Nice of you to emerge from rehab long enough to grace us with your presence.”

“Mother—” Alphard tried, but Walburga silenced him with nothing more than a sideways glance.

She set her sights on Harry again, and he felt his insides recoil. “How nice of my brother to pay the school to get you in,” she said, looking down her nose at him. “I always wondered why he cared about you so much,” she gave him a once over, and Harry felt like she was looking right at his soul, “but you do look just like him, your half-wit of a father. I’m sure it’s just another one of my brother’s ways of alleviating his guilt.”

Sirius stepped in front of Harry, colour high on his cheeks. “You don’t get to fucking talk about James, and you certainly don’t get to talk about Harry,” he spat.

Walburga turned her cruel gaze to Sirius. “He does look just like him though, doesn’t he? Funny that.”

Sirius ground his teeth together. “Just like you look just like mother. You act like her too. Funny that.”

“You must know by now that to me that is the highest compliment.”

“Then you know that to me it’s the worst thing you could be.”

Walburga only smirked again. “I wonder what dear brother Regulus would think of it all.”

Harry grabbed Sirius’s arm before he’d even registered that he’d been about to move.

“You lost the right to speak his name when you couldn’t even be bothered to come to the funeral,” Sirius hissed instead.

Walburga hummed, her back still so straight, still so tall and mighty. She looked back over Sirius’s shoulder, eyeing Harry distastefully. “Is that it? He looks like your dear friend, but he’s a bit like Regulus, isn’t he? I can see it from here, the dreary *melancholy*. All your ghosts in one person, isn’t that nice?”

Harry could’ve sworn Sirius was about to jump on her, felt it in the way his bicep flexed under his hand, but Tom, of all people, cleared his throat as he sauntered over. The library was dead silent, no one sure how to tread, but Tom walked over leisurely, as if he’d never been more at ease.

He had a cigarette in his hand, and he held himself with all the confidence of an aristocrat. He was just as tall as Walburga, and he somehow managed the feet of looking down his nose at her. Only when she glanced his way did he speak.

“I’m sorry,” he said, all false politeness, “but who are you exactly?”

Sirius went still under Harry’s hand, his eyes moving to Tom.

Walburga showed no sign of being thrown by the question other than a slow blink. “Who am I?” she said, tone bored, as if Tom’s question was ridiculous.

Tom only hummed, taking a slow drag of his cigarette. He commandeered the space, everyone waiting for what he was going to say. “I don’t think we’ve had the pleasure of being introduced,” he said eventually.

Again, Walburga showed no overt sign of being thrown off kilter, but her brow furrowed in the slightest. “Walburga Black,” she said finally, after some deliberation. Her intonation was confident, but the name was spoken slowly, a bit of uncertainty trickling into it.

“Oh, I see,” Tom said, nodding. He was so good, a terrific actor. “I take it you’re Alphard’s mother then. Though I am a bit confused, Alphard said his mother was a world renowned actress?” He tilted his head to the side slightly. “Yet I cannot seem to place in what I have seen you.”

The furrow in her eyebrows deepend a bit, and she shifted her weight from one foot to another, only once. “I am,” she said with no little amount of certainty. “Perhaps you recognise me from *Lady Jane*, or *Liaisons dangereuses*.” She said this proudly, as if she were the most famous person in the room.

Tom frowned, shaking his head. “No, I’m certain I didn’t see you in those,” he said airily, and Harry saw how that annoyed her. “Walburga, you said?”

She nodded curtly, her lips thinning in annoyance.

Tom hummed in thought for a second before his eyes lit up and he nodded, clicking his fingers. “I remember now,” he said happily. “You’re the one who married her cousin! It was

all over the magazines, that's where I've seen you."

Walburga's jaw dropped, but she caught it quickly, her nostrils flaring in anger.

Tom smiled at her, a cruelness to it that set Harry on edge. "Or maybe I remember you from the 1974 issue of *Playboy* magazine?"

Walburga's face crumbled for all of two seconds, and she caught herself before taking a staggering step back, her eyes wide on Tom.

A grin had spread across Harry's face, and he was sure he'd never been so attracted to Tom before. Sirius had gone completely slack under his hand, a look of wonder on his face.

Walburga regained her composure as best she could, crossing her arms over her chest. "And who are you?" she all but snarled. "This is very rich coming from someone who doesn't even have a name to speak of."

Tom smiled at her, a predatory thing, as if she'd fallen right into his trap. "Don't pretend to not know who I am, Walburga, I'm fairly certain you tried to get me expelled from this school when I was only twelve. You know exactly who I am. Would you like a direct quote from your letter to the school?"

She did take a step back then, pure hatred passing over her features.

Tom didn't wait for an answer. "What was it?" he said, his tongue running along the edges of his top teeth. "*It is an embarrassment to the legacy and prestige of this school to allow commoners and orphans to attend. It would be in your best interest to send the street rat back to the hole from whence he came*. Very melodramatic, don't you think? You'd know, you wrote it."

As the other parents in the room gasped in outrage, Tom took another drag of his cigarette, poised and confident.

"Walburga, that is simply outrageous," Mr. Malfoy said, eyes narrowed.

"Mother, just go to your meeting with the director," Alphard said, quite unexpectedly. He was still bright red, and just looked so profoundly embarrassed Harry felt bad.

"Don't—"

"Just go," Alphard snapped at her, "God knows that's the only reason you're here."

Walburga stared at him, with nothing but disdain, before turning on her heel and marching out of the chapel.

It was silent as everyone watched her go. Sirius was staring in disbelief and some sort of glee, and Harry was trying to not throw himself at Tom's feet.

"I always thought she was a bitch," Rick's mum said when she and her husband were gone. It earned a loud laugh from Mrs. Nott which served to break the ice in the room, the air

clearing.

The next sound to break out was that of Harry's foot on the ground as he took a solid step to throw himself at Tom, arms wrapping tight around his neck as he jumped up.

Tom caught him, a surprised laugh escaping him as he wrapped an arm around Harry's waist, holding him up.

"You're the fucking best!" Harry exclaimed, a disbelieving laugh following as he pulled back from him.

Tom grinned down at him, an arm still casually wrapped around his waist. "Thank Amelia, she remembers all that inane gossip."

Amelia was smiling when Harry looked over at her. "The kids love that sort of gossip," she said airily.

"The *Playboy* magazine?" Sirius said, laughing. "Even I'd forgotten that!"

Tom shrugged. "Amelia remembered it, but there was this boy, Jason, who collected them at the orphanage. He had all the oldest issues, used to steal them from newsagents."

"You okay, Alphie?" Harry asked, his smile having dropped when he glanced at his friend.

Alphard sighed, hanging his head. "Yeah," he said, sounding nothing short of devastated. "Sorry about," he waved a hand vaguely, "you know."

"Ah, don't apologise," Sirius said sternly. "Listen, Alphard, you don't have to put up with that, you're eighteen, you can do whatever you want."

"What? Am I supposed to just never go back home?" Alphard asked with a derisive laugh, though his eyes were a bit shiny.

Sirius shrugged, smiling at him. He went over and set a hand on his shoulder. "That's what I did. When I finished school I just never went back, I had all my stuff with me already, and I went straight to Jamie's."

Alphard sniffed, looking at Sirius as if he held all the answers. "But where would I go?" he asked weakly.

"Mine, of course," Sirius said, as if it were obvious. "I have enough room, you can have your own bedroom, and you can stay as long as you want."

"Really?" Alphard asked, and it was so hopeful.

Sirius nodded, giving him a hug that was gladly reciprocated.

Harry smiled at the scene, one of his hands finding Tom's forearm that had migrated around his shoulders, draping across his chest.

Remus chuckled, removing a cigarette from behind his ear. “It’ll be just like the Potters’ used to be, strays everywhere.”

Sirius laughed, brushing some hair out of Alphard’s face as he pulled back; it was startling, up close, how similar they looked. “That’s the legacy Effy and Monty would’ve wanted for us.”

“Oh, Euphemia Potter,” Lorraine said dreamily, “she was such a wonderful woman.”

“Don’t forget Fleamont, darling,” Mr. Lestrange said, “he was a gem.”

“I only met them once,” Mr. Nott said, “at a charity gala when I was very young.”

“I was there!” Mrs. Malfoy said brightly. “I remember how they just lit up the space.”

“Oh, and don’t forget James,” Mr. Avery said, “that boy had it all.”

“I had a photoshoot scheduled at the same time as him,” Lorraine recounted excitedly, “the *charisma* that boy had! Gosh! He just brightened up any room he was in.”

And just like that, everyone started talking again. They recounted tale after tale of the work they’d done with the Potters, and Harry listened with rapt attention, soaking all the information up.

Half an hour later, they’d migrated outside into the sunshine and groups had formed again, everyone mingling together. Even Amelia was talking with Mrs. Malfoy who seemed to be complimenting her dress, from what Harry could see.

It was as Harry was chatting with an animated Mrs. Nott about her latest project that the figures of their three Professors appeared further away in the grounds.

“Hello!” Dumbledore said cheerily when he was close enough.

“Albus!”

The adults flocked towards them, and Harry was acutely reminded that he had taught them all —or the majority of them, at the least.

“We simply came to say hello,” Dumbledore was saying when Harry got close enough to hear, “and to let you know that there is a table set up for you all in the cafeteria.”

“How are you feeling about tonight, boys?” McGonagall asked, looking at them expectantly.

“Fine,” Tom said, an edge to his voice that betrayed how nervous they actually were.

“Oh, you will be,” McGonagall said, offering them one of her rare genuine smiles.

Sirius greeted Professor McGonagall excitedly, and she looked, despite the act she put on, absolutely thrilled to see him again.

“Long time no see, Snivellus,” he said next, turning to Snape who stuck his nose up at him. “How’ve you been, mate?” he asked, sticking his hand out amicably.

Snape, his shawls—or blankets, or scarves, Harry still had no idea—wrapped around his arm, reached his hand out with an eye roll. “Well, and yourself, Black?”

“Good, good, come to see Harry with Remus.”

Snape hummed, holding a hand out to Remus who took it happily. “Good to see you, Remus,” he said politely before turning back to Sirius. “Sobriety looks good on you,” he commented.

Sirius snorted. “And hygiene looks good on you. Don’t tell me you’ve been *showering*, Sev.”

Snape glared at him for a second, before his temper got the better of him and he hissed a quiet, “Fuck you.”

Harry bit back a startled laugh, his eyes flying wide open.

McGonagall, with some kind of sixth sense for nonsense, whirled around. “Severus, Sirius, stop it *now*.”

“Professor, *I* didn’t do anything,” Sirius claimed, holding his hands up.

“You never do, you bloody nuisance,” she said, her tone more affectionate than reprimanding.

It wasn’t long before they traipsed up to the castle, and found the table set up for them in the cafeteria. The adults loved it, ‘*a trip down memory lane,*’ they called it. The atmosphere turned a bit frigid as Alphard’s parents joined them, looking reluctant to do so, but they sat at the end of the table where Harry, Tom, Alphard, and Sirius were not, so they went mostly ignored.

—Scene four—

As much as Harry loved spending the day with Sirius and his friends the play was a constant non negligeable worry in the back of his mind, and his classmates seemed to be suffering the same predicament.

Tom was unusually quiet and fidgety, a few times Harry caught him biting his lip, or scratching at his wrist, or thumbing nervously at the chain around his neck—gestures he'd usually suppress in public. Theo was louder than usual, Alphard was ghost white, Gaspar was more or less mute, a faraway look in his eyes, Abraxas kept tucking his hair behind his ears obsessively, and Rick looked tense, shoulders hunched up.

Harry, for his part, kept biting his thumb, a dead giveaway that he was nervous. He answered questions with distracted one worded replies, or an almost spastic shrug.

By the time they left for the theatre, they were insufferable to be around.

It was strange though, because as soon as they actually got to the theatre, the weight lifted a bit. It was no longer this dreaded prospect, abstract and daunting, but simply something they'd done a hundred times over.

Tom was all business, directing the rehearsal in a way that made the younger years take everything very seriously, looking genuinely scared to mess up. It ended up being a good run, perfect on the technical end of things, less so when it came to their acting, but they were saving it for the real thing; not doing the blocking with as much panache as they would later on, not wearing themselves out during the dance scene.

Harry had this sort of buzz in the back of his mind, muting a lot of his thoughts, carrying him through the afternoon in a sort of dissociative state. His brain couldn't keep up with everything going on, the excitement, the nerves, while focusing on the lines he was meant to recite. It didn't help that through it all, the knowledge that he and Tom would be sticking together after their school year was trying to compute in his already overwhelmed and borderline checked out mind.

It was all a bit too much, and more than once he felt the early signs of panic cloying at his chest, making his breathing short. He felt dizzy whenever he looked out at the theatre, the balconies dark and oppressive, the rows upon rows of empty red seats in front of him, the lights blinding when they happened to shine in his eyes. The chatter was incessant, people making last minute adjustments, talking too loud because of all the nerves. The theatre, which Harry knew like the back of his hand, started to feel foreign.

The shade of red of the curtains didn't seem right, he couldn't find his marks on the wooden panels of the stage, the lights shone all wrong, and more than once the lines spoken to him by his friends sounded like an entirely different language. It all felt alien, and his panic only grew because of it.

When they finished the rehearsal it was almost seven, and they'd already decided they wouldn't be leaving the theatre to go back to their families and friends, so they gathered around to get ready for the actual play.

"Harry, you okay?"

It was Rick, a concerned pinch in his brow. They were backstage, in their dressing room. All the other boys turned to him, despite Rick speaking quietly.

Harry felt put on the spot, his mouth moving wordlessly like a deer caught in headlights. The panic festering away in his chest twisted everything in the wrong way, and he clutched at his heart without meaning to, his eyesight tunnelling, and for a moment he thought he might die.

"I've got you," was murmured into his ear, accompanying the arm around his waist, the other wrapping around his chest, unmistakable in their familiarity. "I've got you," Tom repeated, squeezing just right around his chest.

The first gasping breath almost made him feel sick, and the tears prickling at his eyes rushed to fill his waterline.

"Shouldn't you give him space to breathe?" Alphard asked anxiously.

"No, it helps him," Tom said simply. Harry proved his point by twisting in his hold, clinging around his neck desperately, burying into his chest. His ears were ringing, and it felt like his bones were rattling with the shake in his core. "Come on, breathe, Harry," he whispered, a hand under his shirt, pressed flat against his back where he could probably feel Harry's erratic heartbeat.

When Tom set a firm hand on his jaw to tilt his head back and their eyes met, Harry's eyesight blurry, he took a wobbly breath, his mind reeling a mile a minute. "I dunno—" he stammered, breath catching in his throat.

Tom shushed him, thumb stroking just below his ear, distracting him from whatever was rushing through his mind. "Doesn't matter, just breathe."

He got through it, with Tom's steady hand and unwavering gaze. After a while his breaths evened out, and he got to that point where the adrenaline crashed and he felt dazed out, a bit high. His iron grip on Tom loosened to the point where he thought he might be held up by nothing but his arm still solid around his waist.

Bit by bit, the sounds from outside the dressing room started filtering back in, the world around him becoming clearer, coming back into focus. The centre of it all was Tom, of course, the gold flecks in his eyes shining in the dim light, but Harry regained his peripheral vision with every breath he took, and he remembered the other boys with them.

"Fuck," was the first coherent thing he said, lucidity coming back to him a bit abruptly.

"You're alright," Tom said with a small smile, his thumb still rubbing that hollow spot beneath his ear.

“Fuck, sorry, thank you,” Harry stammered, still breathless. He reached up, mindlessly, and wrapped his hand loosely around Tom’s wrist, not moving him, just sitting there.

“It’s fine, Harry, it happens.” A smile, soft and patient.

Taking another deep breath, Harry nodded, leaning into his hand, guiding it up to his cheek, just to feel the warmth he knew not to expect from Tom but was still felt anyway.

He closed his eyes, not really conscious of the way he held Tom’s hand to his cheek, finding comfort in it. “I dunno why it happened,” he said quietly, slowly. “Everything felt off, it was weird. I’m not even that nervous about the play itself.”

“There’s just a lot going on,” Tom murmured, keeping him close, safe in the space between them. “I promise everything was fine, the lighting was good, the theatre’s the same. I know what you mean, but everything’s the same. Sometimes everything just catches up to us a bit too quickly.”

Harry hummed, listening to Tom with only half of his attention, still in that post-adrenaline daze. “Sorry,” he mumbled again, feeling unbearably exhausted at that moment.

“It’s okay,” Tom whispered, pressing the words into Harry’s temple as he deposited a small kiss there.

It was nice, and it put a smile on Harry’s face. And when their eyes met again, in such a soft moment, Harry had words on the tip of his tongue, words that hadn’t been there for a shockingly long time. The taste was almost foreign, startling. The words were, of course, *I love you*.

He’d known that he was still in love with him, but this went beyond that. Beyond infatuation, and attraction, it was the simplest act in the world, to *love*. He’d carried his love around like a burden since their kiss, but it wasn’t a burden at all.

Tom blinked, slow, eyelashes fluttering, and a blush spread out across his cheeks in what seemed like slow motion. The moment stretched, and Harry knew, he knew Tom had seen it. But it didn’t matter, if anything, it made him feel better.

After months of agonising over love, the great tragedy of it, the pain of unrequited feelings—it finally felt like peace, his heart finally shifting to make room for it happily, to coddle it and keep it warm. The love he harboured for Tom had at last found its place within him, and he knew what it felt like; acceptance. It was the final stage, and it was such a relief to get there.

It was Harry who broke the moment, smiling up at Tom gently, fingers shifting against his wrist. “Thank you,” he whispered again, genuine, steady, sure. He squeezed Tom’s wrist, right at the pulse point, as he removed his hand from his skin, breaking their contact.

When he looked around, the others had been kind enough to give Harry some space, evacuating the room, presumably to go and get ready elsewhere. He looked back at Tom, in the dim pinkish light of the room, cluttered with costumes and makeup and props. It was where they’d kissed, but the memory didn’t feel that bitter anymore.

“We should start getting ready,” he said quietly.

Tom was staring at him, the ghost of a frown on his face, but what prevailed was confusion. He looked out of sorts, and for a moment Harry worried it was his turn to have a panic attack. “I—” he said, but he cut himself off, swallowing heavily. “Yes.”

“You good?”

It took him a moment, but Tom nodded, almost reluctantly. “Yes.”

“Okay,” Harry turned towards the rack with their clothes on it, “let’s get ready then. You’ll give me a hand, won’t you?”

“Harry—”

“What?”

“I’m—” he stopped talking when Harry turned back to look at him, eyes wide and cheeks flushed. He was uncharacteristically expressive, but it looked like he couldn’t settle on a single expression; confusion, panic, some form of dismay. “I think—” His words were breathless, enunciation erratic.

“What is it?”

For just a second Tom looked at him, and he looked completely helpless, *frightened*, almost. But then he deflated, his wide eyes dimming, his jaw clenching. “I think we should get ready,” he said, a murmur, barely audible.

Harry frowned, head tilted in confusion. “That’s what I’ve been saying,” a chuckle, nervous, disconcerted, “are you sure you’re okay? D’you need to sit down?”

“I’m fine,” Tom said quickly, visibly composing himself, doing that thing where he tapped each tip of his finger against his thumb on his left hand. “But yeah, I’ll just sit down, help with your jewellery.”

Despite the oddness of the moment, they did just that, almost mechanically. During the preparations Harry tried to focus back on the morning, on his swim across the lake with Tom. The peacefulness and the quiet of the memory didn’t fit into the general buzz of the atmosphere in the theatre. It felt like a dream, another life.

Luna arrived and did his makeup happily, chatting away in her own way, talking about this and that, and it was nice to have someone who talked about something other than the play. She did Tom’s too, and Alphard and Gaspar when they showed up in their dressing room.

Theo had been the next to have a panic attack, after Harry, apparently. And Harry made sure to give him a hug when he appeared with red rimmed eyes.

“We’re gonna do this thing, yeah, Potter?” Theo said, voice watery, emotional, and the moment felt so surreal. They could already hear the theatre filling out, voices carrying all the way backstage. Banging, clattering, from people setting up.

Harry patted his stomach, from under his arm, nodding as he looked up at him. “Yeah, we’ll be great. We always are.”

Theo sniffed, taking a shaking breath. He leant down and pressed a messy kiss to the corner of Harry’s mouth, and Harry did nothing but laugh. “I love you, you know that? One of my best friends. One of six.”

“Oh come on, Theo,” Alphard said, shaking his head as he watched them. “Save it for after the play.”

“No, everyone come here,” Theo said around a sniffle, “we have to huddle.”

“Theo, you need to blow your nose and clean up a bit, it’s almost time,” Abraxas said, coming over anyway.

“I’ll do that after. Come on, Tom, you too.”

When Theo was satisfied with the huddle, Harry sandwiched between him and Alphard, he said, “I’ve had the best year of my fucking life with you all, and I wanted to thank you for that.” He groaned, biting down on his lip, clearly battling tears. “I love you all, and we’re gonna be brilliant tonight, alright?”

“Love you too, Theo,” Harry said, leaning against his shoulder. “You’re a great friend.”

They were all ready, except Theo who needed cleaning up a bit. Their costumes were impeccable, and their makeup was all done. As Harry looked around at them, he found that they were even more handsome than the day he’d met them, which felt like a lifetime ago. How, he wondered, in such a short time could he have lived his whole existence alongside these people, these boys he’d all grown to love, each in their own way. There was an echo of something around their group, something that sounded, in the distance, a lot like family, and Harry’s heart hammered with it. There was no one else in the world he wanted to do this with.

“Like always,” Abraxas said, “there’s someone at the other end of the stage to prompt lines if you forget any, doesn’t matter about minor fuck ups, we can work around them. As long as everyone does their best, and I know you’re all phenomenal.”

“We’ll be fine,” Gaspar declared, smiling at each of them. “It’s us.”

Alphard’s arm tightened around Harry’s shoulders right when Theo’s did, and it felt like one big hug they were sharing.

“Come on, Theo, let’s get you cleaned up,” Tom said.

They broke their circle, and Harry watched as Tom caught Theo under his arm in a friendly embrace, one that Theo obviously relished in, clapping Tom’s back in turn, grinning at him. It put a smile on Harry’s face.

He sent a sideways glance to the mirror again, feeling odd about recognising himself so easily when he looked so different. Hair wild and teased into just the right type of messy, his

eyes standing out surrounded by the sharp black eyeliner, the golden glitter at his temples. It was Gaspar who had said he looked like he'd stepped straight out of a Greek painting, and he was quite embarrassed to admit to himself that he agreed.

"Guys, we're on in ten, you'd best come backstage," Cassandra told them, appearing in the doorway. "Is everyone ready?" She had this excited look about her, looking at them with bright eyes.

"Yeah, we'll be with you in two minutes," Rick said, rubbing his hands together.

Tom finished cleaning Theo up and they left their little haven in the dressing room, hands on each other's backs in both comfort and excited encouragement. As they made their way through the hallways the chatter from the theatre grew louder, oppressive in the sheer amount of voices merging together.

Viola and Margaux were huddled together by the side of the stage, Viola breathing heavily while Margaux tried to calm her down. Louis and George were beside them, dressed in their costumes; smart old-timey suits whereas the girls were in huge Victorian style dresses.

"Alright everyone?" Alphard asked in a whisper as they got to them.

"Bit of stage fright," Viola said with a nervous laugh.

"I think we're all suffering a bit," Gaspar said kindly, a hand on Abraxas's arm who was tucking some hair behind Viola's ear.

She wrung her hands in front of her, catching her breath as she leant into Abraxas's hand.

"Okay guys, I'm gonna go on and announce the play," Cassandra said, coming up to their level, pushing her glasses up her nose. "Girls you need to get into place on the stage, and be ready for when the curtain opens."

Harry blinked against the noise, overcome, for a second, by the cloying panic; his heart hammering, his ears ringing. He tried to focus, cataloguing what he knew; when the curtains opened the seats would be full, faces staring up at him, unfamiliar, but there'd be spotlights, he wouldn't be able to see the faces correctly, unless he focused. There was a piano, down by the stairs, that Gaspar would play during his dance scene with Tom—God, the dance scene, he couldn't remember the steps, try as he might he couldn't remember—

"Harry, calm down," Tom murmured, thumb just below his ear, chest pressed to his back.

Snapping back into focus, Harry took a deep breath. He had no idea where these unrelenting nerves were coming from. He turned a bit, looking up at Tom. "I don't know if I can remember anything," he admitted in a whisper.

Tom smiled down at him, reaching up to straighten the crown in Harry's mess of hair. "Once you step onto the stage, everything will come back. You know that."

He did, but the reminder helped. He nodded, taking another deep breath. And, impulsively, he grabbed Tom's hand and laced their fingers together, his knuckles white with the tightness of

his grip. It anchored him, if only a bit.

Cassandra was in front of the curtain, and the constant buzz of chatter faded as it morphed into quiet shushing, until the theatre was quiet aside from the odd shuffle or cough.

“Good evening,” Cassandra said, her voice only a bit shaky. “Thank you all for coming to see us tonight. You will be watching the seventh year students’ play, *Elio*. It has been written, directed, and played in by our very talented seventh years. I would like to note that the majority of the music played was also composed by them. It is a tragedy in five acts. I hope you will enjoy it. Goodnight.”

The theatre clapped politely, excited murmurs breaking out. The girls, in the meantime, had sat themselves on the bench set out on the stage, and were awaiting the beginning of the play. Cassandra went over to the other side of the stage, barely a silhouette in the darkness.

Through the curtain Harry could see the lights dim over the audience, a single spotlight focusing on the stage. And, when Cassandra gave the cue, the curtain opened, signalling the beginning of Act one.

LADY PRISCILLA: *My dear, have you heard the news?*

The theatre fell into silence as the girls started playing, saying their lines back and forth. Despite Viola’s prior nerves, there wasn’t so much as a shake to her voice. In fact, they played their roles so well, even Harry, who had heard them say their lines hundreds of times, was absorbed in it. It was no secret that Viola and Margaux adored their parts in the play, the gossiping ladies of the court, and they really did the roles justice.

When Louis and George went onstage, joining them, they brought just the right energy with them. The mischievous young men, entertaining the Ladies. Louis stood beside Margaux, tall, perfect posture, while George perched on the side of the bench, talking animatedly.

When they exited and the lights dimmed, some sixth years rushed to clear the stage after them, and after a short lull, when the stage was correctly set up, Tom squeezed Harry’s hand in his and they shared a quick smile before he went on with Theo and Abraxas.

“*My Lord, everything is in order for the arrival of the Prince of Italy tomorrow.*” Theo spoke, taking his place on the stage.

Tom walked a few paces, a frown on his face. He delivered his lines flawlessly, not a waver to his voice, every word enunciated to perfection.

Harry watched him, more than any of the other boys, as he had a habit of doing. Still, after so long, and so many hours spent in the theatre, Tom was the most captivating sight. He had a way of drawing the viewer in, his presence on the stage absolute and his voice ringing out crystal clear across the whole theatre.

When Alphard and Gaspar joined them onstage, only Rick and Harry were left on the sidelines. They were pressed elbow to elbow, and Harry found comfort in the proximity. Throughout the whole experience of the play, since January, Rick had been his partner of

sorts, just as Elio and Alessandro were in the play. He'd taught him the correct pronunciation of the Italian words, taking their time to perfect their projection of closeness onstage.

Anchored by Rick's steady presence, Harry dared glance out into the public, still visible from his lookout backstage, not quite cast into shadows by the spotlight. In the front row were their Professors, along with who Harry this time recognised as school sponsors. It was a couple rows behind them, though, that Harry's eyes strayed to.

Sirius was sat between Hermione and Remus, eyes trained on the stage. He was sitting on the edge of his seat, looking up at the actors with undivided attention, eager to learn more about the story and memorise every detail. Despite all the eyes that would be on them, Harry found comfort in his Godfather's stare.

All too soon, Theo and Tom were left alone on the stage. Alphard, Gaspar, and Abraxas had come off with bright smiles, exhilarated little breaths coming out of them. In their eyes was reflected the absolute pleasure they all took in acting, no nerves left behind. Harry knew that once he got out there he'd be the same.

"*Well, my Lord*," Theo said, closing his dialogue with Tom with a curt bow, before exiting the stage.

Harry gave his wrist a quick touch as he passed him, but his eyes remained on Tom, who, even alone, managed to commandeer the space with a confidence few could.

"*Politics—how boring,"* he said after some frustrated pacing. His silver rings glinted in the spotlight, making him look like a true King. "*I did so hope becoming King would be less tedious. Is this all life is? Is this all life has to offer?"* He asked these questions with an air of dismay, his mighty act dropping only the slightest, revealing a sliver of the true character. *"Sacrificing my soldiers' lives to conquer distant lands to quell my boredom?"*

"I do suppose my divine position grants me such liberties—it is my right, after all, to seek fulfilment in this life. Conquering the world should surely grant me that. In the meantime, I must revise my strategy for the negotiations to come with Italy." He stopped his pacing, his jaw clenched in annoyance, teeth grating almost audibly. *"I will not be humiliated by a Prince."*

And with that declaration, he left the stage.

His eyes were bright as they met Harry's, a delight in them that put a happy smile on Harry's face. "It's going well," he whispered as the sixth years adjusted the set quickly with the lights dimmed, "they're very engaged."

"That's a good thing," Harry whispered back, a giddiness starting to spread through his stomach.

Tom nodded fervently, coming to stand on Harry's other side as Gaspar, Alphard, and Abraxas reentered the stage. Harry watched him for a second as he watched the stage intently. Even when he wasn't onstage, he still attracted Harry's gaze, like a magnet.

"*What do they enjoy in Italy? Music? Art? Should my poetry or my playing be of liking to the Prince?*" Gaspar asked anxiously, wringing his hands in front of himself. *"I worry he will grow bored of it—and that it will reflect poorly on our King's hospitality.*"

Gaspar's fluttery anxiousness, Alphard's perfect aristocratic worry, Abraxas's cool manner, it all came together so well. Harry always thought his friends were extremely talented, all in their own right, but it was always a pleasure to see it in action.

"It feels surreal," Tom whispered into his ear, startling him.

"What does?" Harry asked once he'd gotten over the initial spook, turning to look up at him.

Tom fidgeted with his hands, shifting his weight between his feet. "To be playing this, in front of an audience."

Harry exhaled through his nose, a small huff of laughter. "I know right," he murmured, distracted by a creak from one of the chairs in the audience.

Tom, without preamble, leant down until his breath fanned over the shell of Harry's ear. Harry stilled, confused when Tom didn't say anything.

"There's no one I'd rather play this with," he whispered, barely audible for the hesitancy, but overly enunciated, clear as day. He lingered, mouth almost pressed to Harry's neck, before he pulled back with a pleased smile, not meeting his eyes, hands clasped behind his back.

Swallowing, shaking himself from his stupor, his heart hammering against his chest, Harry said, "Me too." Again, on the tip of his tongue, the words *I love you* fought to break through. He swallowed them back down.

All too soon, the first Act came to a close, the curtain falling as the boys left the stage.

"You did amazing!" Harry whispered furiously, trying to focus on the play, and less on the ghost of Tom's warmth against his neck, the words flashing in front of his eyes.

The boys huddled closer, bouncing on the balls of their feet, bright grins lighting up the dingy space backstage.

"First Act already over!" Gaspar said giddily. Outside of their little cocoon, students were setting the stage for Act two, and there was some murmuring going on from the audience.

"See? I knew it was gonna be a right doddle," Theo said, grinning all the way to the moon and back, expression boisterous, cheeky.

Rick snorted. "You were having a panic attack twenty minutes ago."

"Eh," Theo waved a hand, shrugging, "who cares?"

"Ready for Act two?" Cassandra asked in a hurry as she rushed past them with the board that she'd hold up to signal the second Act to the audience.

They didn't have time to reply, as she'd already gone, so without further ado, they all went onto the stage, except Harry, Alphard, and Rick.

As the curtain opened again, the scene commenced, and Harry was hit by another wave of nerves, suddenly unable to remember what his opening line was. He trusted himself though, trusted Tom's words, and knew that once he got out there, it would all come back to him. He watched, enthralled by his friends playing a few metres before him.

When Alphard went on, breathless, saying, "*My Lord! The Prince of Italy is here*!" he captured everyone's attention. Even throughout the audience, Harry could tell there was a sense of anticipation, and his stomach curled in on itself.

"*Bring him in*," Tom said, choosing his spot to stand, centre stage, flanked by the others.

It was Harry's cue, Alphard laying out an arm at his side of the stage, as if in greeting, yet it was only Rick's hand on his back that got him moving.

As he got older, Harry would class this moment as one of the more surreal ones of his life; walking onto that stage, playing Elio for the first time, revealing this elusive character to the world.

A hush certainly fell over the theatre, and the charms on the bracelets at his ankles jingling together caused quite the dramatic effect as he stepped into the spotlight, almost blinded by it. His movements were slow, intentional. Rick was by his side, tall and imposing, and yet Harry knew that it was him that caught everyone's attention.

A stark white, brought out by the light, gold glinting all over his body, standing out like a sore thumb. Everything slowed, his heartbeats mellowing to a soft kick but pounding in his ears. All eyes were on him, and yet, as always, it was Tom's that left him breathless.

Rick cleared his throat, a hand held out in front of him as he said, "*The Crown Prince of Italy, Elio*."

Harry was almost sure he heard a gasp from the audience, almost certain it was Sirius.

His eyes remained on Tom, like they always did. He dipped his chin the slightest, knees bending minutely. "*Your Majesty*," he said, pronouncing the words slowly, a tease, his tongue running against his teeth.

A pin drop could've been heard in the theatre, and the moment stretched, everyone seemingly holding their breaths.

The sound of Theo taking a step forward broke the stupefied silence, and he bowed low. "*Your Majesty, welcome*."

Abraxas sprung into action next, bowing deeply. "*We hope your journey was not too arduous, your Majesty*."

Silence fell again as Harry only acknowledged them with a tilt of his head, his eyes still locked with Tom's across the stage separating them.

Uneasy, too long, *intentional*, Theo stepped up. "*My Lord*?"

Tom's eyes roamed over him, and he took four brisk steps before he was in front of Harry, the others sharing looks behind his back. "*Elio*," he said the name like a confession, a breathless prayer, "*the sun*." He took Harry's hand in his and bent down, pressing a kiss to his knuckles.

Harry only smiled, used to the display. "*Your Majesty*."

"*Alarik, please*," Tom said, letting go of his hand gently, only after brushing his thumb over the rings.

"*I am grateful for your hospitality, Alarik. My father sends his kind regards*." Words spoken slowly, with the intention of reeling everyone in; eyes on Tom, looking up from under his lashes, purposefully coy.

Everything about Elio was seductive, from his appearance to the way he spoke, to the simple way in which he existed. His movements were always deliberate, and his words carefully weighed. But far from manipulative, his character was genuine in his sultriness, all the more appealing.

Tom, madly, could play the infatuation to perfection; from the slow smile that he kept trying to bite back, the bright eyes, the fidgety demeanour, itching to reach out and touch him.

Their dialogue played out, inching closer to one another as they did so, eyes never leaving the other's. It was a dance in and of itself, from the very beginning they were spinning circles around each other.

"*I will see you tonight, Elio*," Tom said, giving in and reaching out to brush his fingers against Harry's wrist, a playfulness passing between them.

Harry smiled, charming, careful, a flash of teeth, chin held high. "*I look forward to it*. *Arrivederci, Alarik*."

Taking a moment to bask in the sight of each other, Harry only turned at Rick's cue, his bracelets sounding out again, startlingly striking in the quiet. They exited the stage, Gaspar leading the way for them.

The stillness of the scene once they'd exited was almost unnatural, like a painting, the aftermath of some great shock. And then, all of a sudden, it wasn't. Tom, arms held close to his body, and then thrown out by his sides, sauntered over to the makeshift window, peeping out, unable to keep still.

He played the madness of infatuation so well, like everything else he played. The jitteriness, the erratic responses to Theo and Abraxas's remarks, the careful expression slipping into one of sheer madness. Harry watched, transfixed by his acting. He tapped his chin, scratched his hair, ducked his head at all the right moments, lines delivered with both conviction and the messiness of someone falling over themselves to make a point. He was phenomenal, and from what Harry could peep, the audience thought so too.

When it was just him, when Theo and Abraxas had been dismissed, he paced the stage, going from breaking into a maddening grin to putting a hand over his mouth in worry. He delivered his parting lines flawlessly, between fast paced, words tumbling out of his mouth, to almost unbearable pauses between sentences.

He left abruptly, and the lights dimmed with his departure.

They only had a few seconds, and Harry gave him a bright grin, his nerves having melted off him sometime in the last fifteen minutes. Lysandra was with them, ready for her scene coming up, and Harry gave her a thumbs up before entering the stage as the lights came back on, Rick in tow.

The stage had been cleared, giving way to what was supposed to be their rooms. Rick sat heavily on the small sofa, legs spread, arm along the back of it. Harry preferred to roam around distractedly, eyeing the mirror at the back corner of the stage, reflecting the audience through the bright glare of the spotlight.

Clearing his throat gruffly, Rick said, "*Your father sent you to discuss politics, not attend balls.*"

Harry huffed a quick laugh, picking up a trinket on the desk that had been set out between scenes. "*You know what I think of politics, Alessandro, and I have told my father as much*."

Despite his casualness with Alessandro, Elio retained his natural elegance, his charm.

Rick grinned, a shark-like thing. "*You would rather seduce the King*?"

Far from thrown by his accusation, Harry smiled, looking down at the trinket still in his hand. "*It is no fault of mine the King wishes to throw a ball in my honour*."

Sitting forward on the sofa, elbows to his knees, Rick assessed him. "*You like him*."

"*We have barely met*."

"*But you like him*."

Harry steeled himself, setting the trinket back on the desk, a slow smile stretching across his mouth. He didn't look at the audience, but towards Rick. "*He is very fetching, is he not? Charming, too*."

Rick laughed incredulously, shaking his head as he sat back again. "*Your father told me to keep an eye on you, to ward off your romantic nature*."

"*Oh?*" Harry made his way over to the sofa, sitting primly beside Rick, angled towards him, a playful smile on his lips. "*And how will you do that*?"

"*I will not*," Rick said dutifully. "*I trust you*."

Harry sighed, looking back towards the side of the stage, beyond Rick, catching the faint silhouette of Tom. "*I was told he was young, and handsome, and yet I did not expect him*."

"*I hear he has never been taken with anyone*," Rick said conversationally, inspecting his nails on his hand laid against the back of the seat.

"*Do you think he will be taken by me*?" Again, charmingly coy, genuine interest.

Rick snorted, eyeing him. *"He looked smitten, Elio. When has anyone not been taken with you*?"

"*You have not*."

Rick shrugged. "*You are my friend. I do not care for your looks*."

"*And my charming personality?*" Harry was smiling, a playfulness to their interaction.

"*Leaves to be desired*," Rick said, without hesitation.

They laughed, both of them relaxing on the sofa as they did so.

Curiously, Rick looked at him after a second. "*Would you let him court you? I have never seen you quite so enchanted upon meeting someone*."

Harry took a breath as he thought about it, the audience in front of them completely forgotten. "*I think…I believe I would like to*," he settled on, delivering his line with a sigh of regret. "*But I have a duty to do*."

"*I thought you did not care for politics*."

Harry looked at him sharply, cocking an eyebrow. *"I am no politician*."

"*Ah*," Rick said, nodding, a humorous smile on his lips, *"l'assassino.*"

"*My father would not have sent me if it were a simple matter of politics, Alessandro*."

Rick smirked, a certain amount of friendly derision on his face. "*L'arma fatale, l'arma segreta."*

Harry rolled his eyes, going to hit his arm before a knock interrupted them. He stood up as Lysandra entered the stage, looking, to her credit, like she was keeping it together, though her eyes remained fixedly on the floor.

"*Your Majesty—*" she said, bowing, her small voice carrying surprisingly well. She looked up at Harry— "*pardon my intrusion. The King sends a gift*."

Harry took the box she was holding out to him with a perplexed look and tentative hands. She scurried off as soon as it was out of her hands, and Harry inspected the box as she went, turning back towards Rick.

He opened the box carefully, pulling out the locket as he made his expression morph into that of awed surprise.

Rick huffed out a laugh. "*It would seem the seduction worked. If I am not mistaken that is a traditional courting gift, is it not? If it is an heirloom, as it appears to be*."

Harry ignored him, moving across the stage and setting the box down, running the chain over his fingers like a stream of water. He inspected it for a moment before turning his back on the audience and stepping in front of the mirror, where he set the locket around his neck carefully, placing it above his heart for a moment.

It was almost enough to make his ears ring, the way the theatre was dead silent aside from his movements; the bracelets on his ankles, his bare feet on the wood of the stage, the sound of the locket's chain against his rings.

He continued to look in the mirror, hand wrapped around the locket. The theatre was eerily quiet, only the odd creak of a chair, the faint sound of the charms on his bracelets coming together under the influence of his small movements.

He trapped the locket in his palm as he looked through the mirror, over his shoulder, directly to the audience. And, just when he saw that people noticed, the curtain closed, signalling the end of Act two.

Heaving a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding, Harry turned back to Rick, grinning brightly. They were ushered offstage by stressed out looking fifth years, though Harry had to be very careful of how he tread, so that the bracelets didn't make any noise. Though, by then, far from silent, the theatre was awash with whispers, and Harry liked to think he could make out Sirius's voice in the midst of it all.

"Two minutes, guys," Cassandra said once they were all huddled backstage.

Harry accepted the water being handed to him by a grinning Alphard.

"Lysandra," he said, she was shaking, a giddy sort of smile on her face, "you did brilliantly, well done!" He held his hand up and she giggled as she high-fived him.

"We're all on top of our game tonight, I think," Rick said jovially, setting a hand on the nape of Harry's neck, making him laugh. "This one certainly is!"

"I know right!" Theo exclaimed, grabbing ahold of Gaspar and shaking him in excitement. "We're all doing so well! Keep it up lads."

The extras were filing past them, gathering at the very back of the stage in their fancy costumes. Gaspar followed them on with Alphard's violin on his shoulder, the other boys went too, until only Harry and Rick were left on the sidelines again.

Cassandra gave them a thumbs up, and Gaspar started playing when she went in front of the curtain, holding up the placard for Act three. The soft violin carried into the theatre, and the spectators quietened down as the curtain opened, light shining onto the stage once again.

The scene was set; Tom sitting on his throne, looking casual but antsy, a chair open at his side, Theo at his other.

Alphard stood in front of him, clasping his hands in front of him. "*I hope the event is to your liking, my Lord*."

Tom nodded, looking past Alphard distractedly. "*Fear not Lennon, you seem to have to outdone yourself. Let us hope Elio is of the same opinion.*"

The dialogue flowed, Harry awaiting his cue anxiously. The extras managed their task of looking busy, really melting into the background, only a small buzz of faint chatter coming from them. Gaspar's violin was quiet but complemented the scene well without swamping the dialogue, and the boys were playing fantastically.

"*Is that him? Over there?*" Alphard said, looking right at where Harry was standing.

Tom got up, taking a step, his eyes intent on Harry. "*It is*."

Harry walked into the spotlight with Rick, the violin slowing to a stop, and everyone on the stage turned to face him. On his last step forward, a few away from Tom still, he deliberately moved his foot, just so, until the bracelets made noise.

"*Ladies and gentleman*," Tom said, his voice carrying across the stage and all around the theatre, jovial, excited, apprehensive, "*I have the honour of presenting to you, Elio, the Prince of Italy.*"

The courtiers applauded gently, tapping the backs of their left hands with their right palms.

Harry smiled, dipping his head. "*Thank you. Such a warm welcome.*"

Tom held out a hand to him, which he took happily, their fingers sliding together in an openhanded hold. He smiled, eyes alight as he held himself tall. "*Have a seat, Elio*."

"*Beside yourself? How considerate*." Harry let Tom lead him into the seat, sitting down so that they were angled towards each other.

"*I would have you nowhere else*," Tom admitted, a playful smile that accentuated the boyishness he carried around with him, less severe than his usual expression.

Gaspar started playing the violin again, as background noise, and the extras resumed their activities, some dancing slowly, others chatting in a hushed murmur.

Taking in the scene for only a moment, Harry returned his attention to Tom, and they played their dialogue back and forth, completely wrapped up in one another. Despite all the people onstage, they were at the centre of it, though they didn't care to be—they only had eyes, and ears, for each other. Their dialogue was playful, flirty, riddled with a deeper meaning that they skirted around, never quite speaking their intentions explicitly.

Gaspar recited his poem, Alphard playing the violin, and Harry listened with undivided attention, though his hand had found Tom's, only their little fingers touching on the armrest of his seat. When it was over, Harry spoke his Italian lines with Alessandro, relieved to find that he didn't stutter once.

"*Will you do me the honour of a dance, Elio*?" Tom asked, finally, eyes bright with hope, hand already held out, confident that the answer would be yes.

"*Of course*," Harry said with a smile, only letting a few moments hang in the air between them, making him wait for it.

It was surprisingly easy, sinking into Elio and seeing Alarik in Tom. Of course, there was a level of overlap that existed, but Harry didn't feel like he let his own real feelings overtake the role he was playing. Elio was wholly different from him.

They danced to the waltz Tom had composed specifically for them, that they'd danced to all that time ago in the library. Surprisingly, the ambiance was much the same; a wooden floor beneath their feet, a quiet room that felt full, like the library was full of books, the theatre felt full of people, but that was a negligible part of the background, forgettable when he was in Tom's arms. The music carried, but not enough to cut over their voices.

The others were dancing with some of the courtiers, so it looked a bit less stupid.

"*Do you never wear shoes*?" Tom asked, a funny look on his face.

"*I am prettier without*," Harry replied easily.

"*You are beautiful*," Tom said, and there was a glimmer in his eyes, something that looked distinctly like *Tom*, and not Alarik, and it gave Harry pause. "*If I had known Italy had such a beautiful heir I would have asked for your hand in marriage much sooner*."

The thing their characters had been skirting around for the entirety of the scene, out in the open, finally.

"*Do you really wish to marry me*?" Harry asked, easier to pronounce his lines when they were so surreal, when they couldn't possibly pertain to him and Tom. "*Without knowing me?*"

"*Elio*," Tom said, an intensity to him that almost convinced Harry he'd heard his own name coming out of his mouth, *"I know you like the sun knows the stars, like the preacher knows his gospel, like how God recognises a King*."

Harry swallowed, managing, somehow, to stay in character. "*Yet you do not know who I am. You do not know why I am here*."

A hundred times they'd rehearsed the play, rehearsed this scene; Tom's hand on his waist, dipping him slowly to the music, their eyes never leaving each other's, their proximity—and yet Harry couldn't catch his breath. There was something different in the way Tom played, and though it wasn't obvious, or detrimental to his acting—quite the opposite, actually—it had an odd way of throwing Harry off, making him forget what they were doing.

The thing was, it felt, quite distinctly, like they were in their bedroom, just lying around. Tom had that same soft unguarded look in his eyes.

"*You are here for me, of course*," Tom said as he held him in a low dip, strong arms holding him up. "*Do you not feel how my soul yearns for yours? It is fate that has brought us*

together," he pulled him up until Harry was back on his own feet, holding him closer than he had been before, "*let us not ignore fate, my darling*."

Harry smiled, just short of biting his lip. Latching onto the threads of whatever confidence and brashness Elio's character gave him, he tilted his chin up, almost defiantly, looking up at Tom through his eyelashes, fingers gliding along his. "*Are you in love with me, your Majesty*?"

Something passed over Tom's face, but he was laughing a second later, a small chuckle, caught in the act. "*I fear I may be, Elio*," he confessed.

He'd heard the confession over and over; and Harry didn't know if it was the spotlight shining on them, or the hundreds of eyes staring at them, or the way Tom's hand pressed against his spine—but this one felt a bit too real, a bit too much like *Tom*.

"And if I do not share in your feelings?" A last grapple at sanity, at keeping a hold on the situation, a pivotal point, the decisive moment. Where it was all supposed to be right, but went so horribly wrong.

"*I can see it in your eyes, my love. You would not be in my arms if you did not. The red string pulls at you as much as it does me.*" Brushing away the worry, the doubts.

Harry leant back as Tom crowded closer still. "*And where will it lead us, this string of fate that ties us together? To salvation or perdition?*"

Tom smiled down at him, and suddenly Harry understood, intimately, why Elio didn't think it was such a bad idea just then. A flash of teeth, a boyish delight, cheeky. "*I am already at the Golden Gates by simply looking at you, grant me entry and we shall see Heaven together.*" A suggestion, a plea, an audacious proposition.

A beat, the soft piano accompanying their very own melody, the last ringing notes of the piece. A tilt of head, tongue darting across his bottom lip, their eyes meeting in the small distance between them. "*Save me from perdition then, your Majesty*."

Tom's grin was blinding, ecstatic. The song had ended, and there was no hesitation as he took Harry's hand, and they left the stage together, breathless with it all.

In the safety of the shadows, hidden backstage, they grabbed each other's arms like giddy kids, grinning like idiots.

"Are you ready for the dance?" Tom asked in a whisper, as Theo's voice rang out from the stage.

Harry nodded fervently, his pent up nervous energy buzzing throughout him. "Yes. God, I hope we don't fall and make idiots of ourselves."

"We'll be fine," Tom said reassuringly, squeezing his arms tightly. "I have to go for my costume change now, be back in a few. Do you need anything?"

"No, I'm good, hurry up though."

“Will do.”

Harry watched him go, removing the crown from his own head carefully. A sixth year student took it from him, and he gave her a grateful smile as he turned back towards the stage to watch the others.

It was nerve-wracking, the prospect of actually doing the dance in front of an audience. In his mind it existed as a sort of joke, almost, a secret thing he and Tom practised in the evening. The thing that had led to their kiss. Symbolically, to Harry, it was a very important, earth-shattering thing. It almost didn’t feel right; to *perform* it.

He tried to take his mind off it by enjoying the play though. The other boys came off, though not for long, and he watched Viola, Margaux, Louis, and George emerge from the gathering of courtiers and take centre stage for their brief dialogue. He watched the lights dim at the end of the scene, and the younger years scramble to set the stage for the next one.

Only when the boys were in the middle of their scene, Rick appearing in their midst onstage, did Tom come back, barefoot, black slacks, black loose shirt tucked into his trousers, unbuttoned at the top, cuffed at the wrists. His head was devoid of his crown, and his hair had been touched up. His silver rings glinted on his fingers as they caught in the reflection of the light, the chain he wore around his neck sitting against his defined collarbones.

“Ready?” Harry asked, dragging his eyes away from the scrutiny he was giving him. He wiggled his fingers, digging his toes against the wood beneath his feet. He was sweating anxiously, his hands moist with it. The jewellery was cool against his skin, but he could feel the way in which his sweaty skin made it warmer, heavier.

Tom hummed, eyes trained on the stage. One of his hands found Harry’s lower back and it was a welcome support.

All too soon the second scene was over, and their friends were leaving the stage cast in shadow. They all gave them a thumbs up as they crossed paths, encouraging smiles all around.

The set changes were next to nonexistent, and before Harry could even wonder if he was actually ready to do it, the first note of *Rêverie* emanated in the theatre from the piano by the stairs, and Tom’s hand on his back was urging him forward.

For a dreadful moment, Harry felt rooted to the spot. But after a quick breath he was back onstage, and all his worry melted off him. He laughed as he ran on, looking over his shoulder just as Tom caught up with him, the piano growing in volume with every second, until it was the only thing that could be heard in the large room.

It was a blur; the blinding spotlight, invisible faces beyond, every push and pull between Harry’s body and Tom’s. Their hands came together sensually, a slide from tip of finger to wrist. Their breaths came in short in the small distance between them. Tom’s hand on his waist was familiar, it knew its way around his body as if it were a part of him, and, in turn, Harry’s body knew every cue, knew when to turn and when to fall—undivided trust.

If it weren't for the piano, their breathing would be loud, and Harry was sure the pounding of his heart would be heard.

A moment later—or perhaps an hour—Tom was drawing him in for the last time, just at the edge of the stage, between too-bright-light and obscure darkness. He held him with a tenderness that Harry almost shied away from, heart constricting with it. And, with all the confidence in the world, Tom pressed his nose to his cheek for a moment, lips ghosting on his skin.

Harry's lashes fluttered, and his fingers tightened where they'd found purchase on Tom's neck.

And then he was pushed back—gently, mind—and he fell, offstage, into Rick who had kindly offered to catch him on the other side.

When Harry found Tom's eyes in that split-second between then and the next, where Tom would return to the centre of the stage, there was a quiet concern there, lingering a moment too long, making sure Harry was alright, that he'd been caught. A smile followed, a minute thing, *all Tom*, before the moment passed and Alarik was back, turning to the stage, pacing, passing his hands through his hair, catching his breath, a manic grin on his face.

Harry watched, mesmerised as he caught his own breath. The way Tom dragged a finger across his bottom lip, his dishevelled state, the shirt not quite sitting perfectly on his shoulders, his hair a mess, his eyes bright and cheeks flushed. It was almost impossible to think that he could do it all in real time, in front of an audience.

Harry watched him speak, his erratic words of utter delight, morphing into paranoia, anger, resentment, as he looked upon the audience; demeanour no longer that of delighted disbelief, but defensive, and biting.

"*Who else has dared to look at him? This picture is mine, can anyone else claim the emeralds of his eyes? They are mine by right. What is a King without riches? Without art? Without power? — They wish to take him from me, they wish to take my power, my prize. I will kill them. I will kill all who have seen him, all who claim to know him, all who wish to take him from me.*"

He spoke the words like a promise, a threat, meeting the audience head on. And as his voice rang out, leaving behind an eerie silence, the realisation of what was to come, the curtain closed.

"Five minutes this time, guys," Cassandra told them, giving them a thumbs up as she went past. The people in the audience were applauding, as it was custom to between acts, and their animated chatter took over the theatre in a matter of seconds.

Coming over to the sidelines, Tom unexpectedly took Harry's face in his hands, and whispered, "Well done, you were amazing."

The words, enough to take Harry's breath away, held nothing to the look in his eyes, the aching fondness in them, the gentleness with which he held Harry's cheeks.

“So were you,” he choked out, patting Tom’s left forearm, blinking quickly against the dizziness of having his heart rate spike so fast.

Tom gave him a small smile, lingering in the touch for a moment longer, before he pulled away and strode past Harry, over to someone handing out water bottles. Harry’s eyes followed him without him meaning to, stuck on the way his shoulders moved under his shirt as he stretched up, brushing hair out of his eyes. The way his Adam’s Apple bobbed in his throat as he drank, it all seemed to happen in slow motion, like a cheap shot in a porno, and something in Harry’s stomach stirred to life.

“Act four!” Rick said, slamming a hand down on Harry’s shoulder, jostling him out of his mindless boggling.

Harry swayed on his feet, losing his footing for a second. He caught himself on Rick’s arm who was laughing at him. “Yeah, God, it’s flying by, innit?” His voice was steady but it held that distant quality of someone who had been caught in a daydream.

“It is, yeah. Well, over for me in a minute, I’ll be dead!”

Harry huffed a laugh. “We’ll all be dead by the end of it.”

“Yeah, but you’ve still got a way to go.” He turned away from Harry, flagging down Henry, a sixth year student. “Is the blood ready?”

“Yes,” Henry said, a flush on his cheeks, looking warm with the stress of the evening. “In that box, over there.”

Harry watched both of them wander off, and watched as Rick packed a pouch of the fake blood under his shirt. His eyes strayed back to Tom, who was standing by himself, seemingly staring at nothing, eyes unfocused.

He was about to go over to him, to make sure everything was alright, but Cassandra reappeared, motioning for everyone to get into place.

There was a bit of a scuffle, everyone clearly having expected the five minutes to go on for longer, but they managed to get everything in order; the younger years scurried back into the depths of the backstage, and the seven of them, along with the two boys playing the guards, huddled on the sidelines.

Cassandra quietened the audience by signalling that Act four was commencing with her placard, and when the curtains opened, Rick stepped onto the stage.

Harry watched the scene pan out, startling when Tom put a hand on his waist as he inched past him, stepping onto the stage without a second thought. That was something else Harry couldn’t wrap his head around; how between one step and the other, shadows to spotlight, he morphed into his character so effortlessly. He really wished he’d had the opportunity to see Tom play more, and hoped he’d be able to in the future.

When Rick was lying dead on the floor, Tom's chest heaved, and he wiped away the splashes of blood on his hands quickly, in a panic motion, the way one rids themself of a spider or an insect. He looked around spastically, eyes shifty.

He wiped his hands on his shirt, swallowing heavily, blinking against the spotlight in a practised motion, intentional.

Shakily, he spoke his lines— "*He wished to take Elio from me, I am certain of it. What is done is done. Elio need not know, and if he does he will forgive me.*" — before exiting the stage rapidly, the opposite end from where Harry was standing.

All was quiet for a moment, Harry standing on the edge of the stage, letting the moment linger before speaking. When Tom gave him a thumbs up from the other side, accompanied by one of his cheeky smiles that looked odd outside of their bedroom, he spoke up, still hidden from the public.

"*Alarik*!" he called, loud enough for the whole theatre to hear him, shaking his foot in front of himself to make the charms jingle. "*Alessandro! Alessandro dove sei?*"

Stepping onto the stage he called again, "*Alarik—*" but stopped short, his whole body going stiff in the spotlight, frozen with horror as he looked upon Rick's body.

"*Alessandro—*" he whispered, horror-struck. Then, louder, "*Alessandro*, *cose c'è che non va?*" He rushed over to him, dropping to his knees at his side, hands fluttering over his stomach where the blood gathered. "*Alessandro, what is happening? Alessandro! No no no no no, Alessandro svegliati! Wake up! There's so much blood—*" his hands pressed to Rick's wound, he looked around frantically, overlooking the public, though not directly—he called, "*Help! Someone!*"

"*Your Majesty*, *is everything—*" Gaspar rushed onto the stage, stopping short as he stared at them with wide eyes— "*oh my! What has happened?*"

Harry looked up at him, eyes wide and pleading. "*I do not know*!" he said despairingly. "*I found him here, he needs help!*" The first tears started pricking at his eyes, his breath coming in short bursts.

Gaspar faltered for a second, looking panic-stricken, before he dropped to his knees beside him, hand going to his arm before hovering over Rick's body. *"Guards! Guards!*" he shouted over his shoulder, setting his hand on Rick's chest, shaking him. "*They will come. Is he alive*?"

"*I do not know!"* Harry said, voice cracking as Gaspar pressed his fingers to Rick's pulsepoint.

"*Let me check. It will be alright, Elio*," he said soothingly, "*do not worry. — Oh no*."

"*What*?" Harry asked, frantic, looking at Gaspar pleadingly. "*Is he — oh, dio mio non può essere morto, non Alessandro.*" It didn't matter if his pronunciation was perfect or not, he

babbled the words almost incoherently, wiping a hand across his cheek to swipe his tears away, smearing some of the fake blood there.

Gaspar looked at him with wide, kind eyes. "*I'm so sorry, Elio*," he said sincerely, taking his hands off Rick and holding them out to Harry, beckoning him into his arms. "*Come here, I'm so sorry*."

Harry wept into his arms, sobs ringing out in the theatre, his shoulders shaking against Gaspar who was rubbing a hand down his back, looking harrowed.

The guards entered the stage, their armour clanging horribly.

"Delancey! What has happened?"

Gaspar leant against Harry, seeming defeated. "*I do not know. The Prince found him*."

"*Murder? Murder in the castle? Who has done such a thing?"*

With a pained sigh, looking at Rick with a scrunched up face, on the verge of tears, Gaspar shook his head, arms tightening around Harry who was still sobbing into his shoulder. "*You must find out!*"

Harry sniffed heavily in the silence that followed, clutching at Gaspar's robes with one hand, holding onto Rick with the other. "*Who would do this*?" he asked the room at large, though from the sound of his voice he might have been asking God himself. "*What has Alessandro done?*"

Gaspar held up a hand to Harry's cheek, holding him steady as he forced eye contact. "*Elio, we will discover who the culprit is, we will get justice for your friend.*" He looked at Harry apologetically, sad in his sincerity and conviction, before pulling him close again, until Harry could bury his sobs into his chest once more. *"It's alright, I'm so sorry*."

Harry didn't see Tom enter the stage, only heard one of the guards speaking to him, and Gaspar's voice addressing him in turn.

"*Delancey let go of him*!" he snapped angrily, one of his hands landing on Harry's shoulder gently as he crouched beside him, prying him away from Gaspar. "*Come here, Elio*," he said, softer, "*into my arms*." After a bewildered sniffle, looking up at him through blurry wet eyelashes, Harry fell into Tom's inviting embrace, wrapping his arms around his shoulders. "*I have you*."

"*Alarik*," Harry said, pulling back to look at him, "*who would do this*?"

Tom ran a thumb against his cheeks, wiping the tears away before wrapping his arms around him, getting a better hold as Harry was whisked up bridal style, burying his face in the crook of Tom's neck. "*It will be alright, come with me, you should not have to see this. You can trust me to look after everything, just hold onto me*," he said, undivided attention on Harry as he carried him offstage.

Harry held on tight, though he didn't need to, Tom always managed to carry him as if he weighed nothing, effortless. He always basked in the feeling, mind always flashing with the memory he did not have, but that existed, of Tom carrying him up to bed on Christmas Eve.

When they were out of the spotlight, Tom set him down carefully, arms wrapped—almost lovingly—around his waist. They looked at each other for a moment, Harry's eyes still blurry from the tears, but Tom murmured, "God, you're good."

It jostled Harry, the sincerity in it, the admiration, and he blinked rapidly.

"Ready to go back on in a minute?" Tom asked, just as the guards were bringing Rick's body back with them and Gaspar was delivering his lines.

Harry nodded, suddenly quite mute.

Tom smiled, looking amused, though Harry didn't understand why. "Hop back up then," he said, holding his arms out.

Mind entrenched in the play, having difficulty keeping up with anything going on outside of it, and his hammering heart always too eager to respond to Tom, he only stared stupidly for a moment before he laughed, the breath knocked out of him with it. Tom grinned in response, and Harry rolled his eyes before wrapping an arm around his shoulders again and jumping back into his arms.

Tom caught him with a huff of laughter, burying it in Harry's neck in a far too casually intimate gesture.

Gaspar had returned backstage, the lights had dimmed, and the scene had been set. Tom gave Harry a second to force himself back into sorrow before he stepped out onto the stage as the spotlight shone on them.

Gently, he set him down on the sofa placed on the stage. "*Here my love, you can rest here, you will be safe.*" His hands were forceful and rough as they fretted over him, brushing his hair back, wiping the blood from his face, landing on his neck where they held, thumbs pressing his chin up. It did nothing to appease the awfully timed arousal that had been plaguing Harry since he'd watched him drink water earlier on, of all things to turn him on. "*I will look after everything. I will keep you safe*." He looked mad, eyes intense and frenzied as he pressed close to him.

Harry grabbed a hold of his wrist, delicate. "*How could this have happened*?"

"*I will tend to it*."

Harry pushed his hands off him, breathing short and panicked. "*Alessandro is dead, Alarik*!" he exclaimed, looking up at him, lost. Then, defeated in the face of Tom's alarm: "*There is nothing to tend to*."

Tom sat beside him, hands reclaiming their place on his face. "*I will make sure nothing can happen to you*," he whispered urgently.

Harry, despite his character's reluctance to do so, leant into Tom's hands. "*Perhaps we shouldn't have…*" he bit his lip, biting back tears. "*It was foolish of me to abandon my friend in unknown territory*."

"*No, no, no*, *Elio, listen to me,*" Tom said, a renewed sense of urgency to him as he shuffled closer, barely an inch of space between them, his shoulders tense as he gripped Harry's cheeks, forcing his eyes up. "*It is not your fault. People want to get to you. And they will pay for it*."

"*You think this is an attack on me*?"

Tom backtracked, soothing over his rough handling with a gentle stroke of his thumb. "*I didn't say that, my darling. Are you feeling alright?*"

Harry sighed, wiping away the remnants of his tears, Tom's hands falling onto his thighs, burning the skin under the thin fabric of the dress. "*I am not certain. Perhaps I should leave for my own rooms*."

"*No stay here, Elio*," Tom said, hands inching up on his thighs, an intimate touch, possessive, urgent. "*You can trust me, I promise. I will look after you.*" He leant forward and pressed a kiss to Harry's cheek, before standing up, hands leaving him reluctantly. *"I will find Delancey, and we shall talk to the guards. I will be back soon, my love."*

Harry turned to him, making to grab his wrist. "*Alarik—*"

Tom turned immediately, a pinch of worry on his features betraying the panic lying beneath the forced calm. "*Yes, my love?*"

Harry dropped his hand, swallowing, eyeing him uncertainly. "*Be sensible*."

Tom huffed a humourless laugh, an almost sad smile on his face—as if all of this was inevitable. *"I'm afraid I am anything but when it comes to you, Elio*."

"*Be careful, then*," Harry said, far from comforted by Tom's words.

"*I will return shortly, my darling*."

"*Va bene, amore*," Harry said, resigned, as he watched him exit the stage.

Alone, Harry sighed, pressing his elbows into his knees as he buried his head in his hands, rubbing over his face, digging his hands into his hair.

"*Alessandro*," he murmured to himself, "*what a tragedy!*" He sat back against the sofa, hanging his head over the edge of it. "*He was a good man.*" He sighed again, basking in the silence for a moment, uncaring of how hundreds of eyes were upon him. He moved again, sitting on the edge of the sofa, gripping it anxiously. He bit his lip, worrying it between his teeth. "*Alarik asks me to trust him when my friend has just been assassinated within these very walls, though my mistrust is perhaps misplaced. After all, I should be the one who is not trustworthy.*"

He got up quite suddenly, his bracelets jingling, and he paced over to a chest, picking up a piece of cloth there absentmindedly. "*But there is something… I do not believe Alarik to be innocent in this affair. Perhaps from one assassin to another, it is a shared knowledge. I see it in his eyes—he was not surprised when he saw Alessandro.*"

He took a sharp breath, dropping the cloth back onto the chest, turning away abruptly, his head in his hands. "*— Ah, che orribile!"* He dropped his hands, walking over to stand at the back of the sofa, gripping the back of it. "*With Alessandro gone, it would be wise to focus on my intended task, it would only be fair, to avenge a friend. But I find myself reluctant to do so —*" He rounded the sofa again and laid down dramatically, looking up at the ceiling— "*to choose between revenge and love! How terrible! How the fates have forsaken me!*" He wallowed for a moment, arm thrown over his face, before he got up again, resolute. "*I must find answers*," he declared, exiting the stage in a hurry.

The next four scenes Harry watched from the sidelines, as one by one his friends succumbed to Tom's hands. It was all so fast paced, but they did brilliantly. Aside from a bit of a scuff up in scene three—Theo stumbled over a line and preferred to repeat it from the beginning, though he had been thrown off by a slight technical error in the setup of the scene—the blocking was perfect, the blood flowed as it was supposed to, and Tom gave an unforgettable performance.

Harry had held his breath at the end of scene six; Tom holding the dagger to Theo's throat, a hand in his hair to hold his head back, Theo's unrelentingly loyal hand on his arm, Theo's last scathing, *"I will ask God to release you from this madness, my friend.*" He even audibly gasped when Tom 'snapped his neck', though it was drowned out into the sea of gasps from the audience. Theo was unnaturally good at doing it, and Tom always seemed to use too much force, but it just spoke of how well they played off of each other.

When it was done, Tom stood there, staggering back as his chest heaved, eyes wide as the dagger clattered to the floor. He looked straight at the public, face decomposed in its distress at what he'd done, hands shaking at his sides.

The curtain closed abruptly, and it marked the end of the fourth Act. Harry watched, heart beating madly from the play itself, and an adoring smile on his face as he watched Tom help Theo up. They were grinning, and they clapped each other on the back as they put their arms around one another's shoulders.

The applause from the audience was deafening, starting a beat too late in their stupor. Harry grinned, overwhelmed with pride at what they'd achieve.

"Harry," Cassandra said, stopping for a second as she passed him, "ready in five, yeah?"

He nodded dutifully, eye catching on the younger students streaking the back wall in blood as he watched her go.

"How did we do, Hazza?" Theo asked as he and Tom got to his level, their grins blinding and infectious.

Harry laughed, bright and giddy. “Did you hear me gasp? I thought you were dead, wanker! You’re too good at that!”

Theo was almost bouncing up and down with glee, anchored by Tom still holding onto him. He laughed, nodding fervently. “I know! God, I can’t believe it’s over for me! Best night ever!”

He grabbed Harry and shook him roughly, before running off to the other boys, slapping their shoulders when he got there.

Laughing, Harry turned back to Tom who was covered in the fake blood; his sleeves were rolled up and his entire hands and forearms were soaked, his shirt much the same. “Here, you’ll want some water,” he said, handing over the bottle he’d been holding. “You were fantastic.”

Tom flashed him a smile, taking the bottle and drinking half of its contents while Harry looked away, unwilling to encourage his untimely burst of attraction. “Thank you,” he said, setting the bottle down. “I did think I’d done particularly well.”

“You did,” Harry said, lips curling into a smile as he looked back at him; his flushed cheeks, exhilarated grin. “I was on the edge of my seat. Metaphorically.”

“I’m sure we’ll be even better for the last Act. We’re both on top of our game tonight. The monologue you did was mind blowing.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose in surprise at the sincerity of the exaggerated compliment. “Well,” he said, getting his wits about him, “let’s give them a show to remember, yeah?”

Tom nodded, his tongue darting out to wet his bottom lip, a motion Harry tracked with religious intent. “Let’s.”

Not a moment later Cassandra was ushering everyone into position, and Harry prepared for his entry. Once the curtain was open and the theatre once more silent, he stepped onto the stage, the spotlight not quite so bright, dimmed, giving the scene a dingy look.

He walked slowly, carefully, not making a sound.

“*The castle is quiet, and yet it speaks in a murmur. It recalls the massacre that has taken place on this night, and the walls will remember it for years to come.”* His words were carefully enunciated, cadence slow, calming down after the whirlwind of Act four. “*It was not meant to be so, everything is wrong. The role of the assassin is played by the wrong person, his victims should have never died, and I should not still be here.”*

He was near the back wall, and as he walked along it he dragged his hand through the blood that had been painted onto the wall, hand coming away bloody. All the while he was silent, letting the moment stretch.

He sighed, taking his hand back as he returned to centre stage. “*And yet red is the colour of love, of romance. It is a red that shines in his eyes, in his heart. What a terrible night, a*

terrible fate." He wiped his hands together, body angled away from the public, a sorrow to his stance, though resignation reigned. "*Perhaps love cannot be more than a tragedy, more than a massacre. I should not have entertained him, perhaps I should have not come. I allowed myself this pleasure, the one of falling in love. I do not regret it, yet I mourn it.*"

He took another step, towards the right side of the stage, opposite from Tom, and his ankle bracelets jingled, loud, almost startling in the silence. It echoed for a second as he came to a stop.

Sharply, he turned his head toward the public, looking at them directly for the first time. "*It is time to set the roles right*." The lights dimmed further with every step he took towards the sidelines, until the stage was once more decked in darkness as he disappeared.

There was no noise from the audience in the thirty seconds it took to set the next scene, too anxious to see the end of the play, and the silence grew eerie, a desperation in it to cling to the hope that things could be made right.

Harry watched from the other side of the stage as Tom stepped out onto it, the sound of his steps loud in the silence. The stage was the same as the previous scene, blood smeared on the back wall, and bare, save for the addition of Alarik's throne, which stood menacingly at the back of the stage, facing the audience.

Tom paced, breathing loud as his chest heaved, passing his hands through his hair sporadically, smearing blood there. Harry's heart pounded in his chest, all too aware of the ending in sight.

"*What have I done? — What have I done? — What have I done?"* Tom asked no one in particular, voice growing in panic with every word. He finally stopped his pacing, visibly trying to catch his breath as he pressed the heel of his palms into his eyes, shaking himself as he dropped his hands, blinking in the bright spotlight. "*If I have Elio, everything will be fine. Everything is fine. He will forgive me. Our love will conquer all."*

He was convincing himself of his words, untrue outside of the realm of his delusional mind. He was quiet again, continuing to breathe as he waited for Harry to join him on stage.

Harry took his time, dragging it out. He first took a tentative step, alerting Tom to his presence, before stepping fully onto the stage, bracelets jingling. He kept his distance, distrustful eyes on Tom.

"*Your Majesty*," he greeted, voice carefully even. The ornate dagger tucked under his waist chain dug into his spine, keeping his posture straight. It was hidden from Tom, though the audience would soon notice it.

"*Elio*!" Tom said, something a lot like relief in his breathless voice. He took a step forward, adding on, "*My love*."

The way he said it, the way his eyes were wide with adoration and sorrow, the way his shoulders sagged, as if he wanted to collapse into Harry—it was almost enough to convince Harry to fall into him himself.

Instead, he raised his chin, grinding his teeth, and said, as coolly as he could, "*You have blood on your hands, your Majesty*."

Tom stopped, stiffening, before his whole demeanour collapsed on itself, his expression clear in its suffering. "*It will wash off*," his tone of voice edged on a whine.

"*I am not so sure*," Harry said, maintaining the disaffected coolness. The silence in the theatre stretched as they looked at each other, and Harry gave in, dropping the pretence, letting his frustrated pain show. "*Why did you do it?*" he asked, a desperate, furious whisper. "*Why did you kill them all*?"

Tom floundered for a moment, taking another step forward. They were each on a side of the throne, but they were inching towards meeting in the middle. "*For you*," he said resolutely, voice dripping in sincerity, believing the empty words.

Harry clicked his tongue, grinding his teeth again. "*Such a selfish reason*."

"*But it was for you*." He did whine then, the last word mounting in pitch, just enough for it. His hands were in front of him as if to prove how deeply he meant it, how unequivocally he believed it. Covered in blood.

"*It was not for me if it was for yourself. If it was for you to keep me for yourself."*

Tom took another step, reaching centre stage, by himself. "*You do not understand—*" He was desperate, pleading eyes on Harry—the first time they'd done the scene Harry had been a flustered mess.

"*I understand perfectly well*," he snapped unflinchingly. "*My father warned me of love, of wars that started because of jealousy and grief. When I was nothing but a child I was dubbed a Helen of Troy, and my father vowed to keep me sealed away for this very reason. He warned me to never trust a man in love—to never succumb to the woes of love because they are but a step from madness*." He was taking slow steps forward as he spoke, words fast and scathing. He stopped, levelling Tom with a pitying look. *"And as I look at you, a man I was told was strong, stoic, brave, powerful, and cruel—I see that my father was correct. A man in love is nothing but a fool. But I never heeded my father's warnings, love is not this—love is not war, and bloodshed, and violence. Love is not bathed in blood but in sunlight. You are a fool, Alarik, but you do not love me.*"

Tom put his head in his hands, fists clenched in frustration. He brought them away, hair dishevelled. "*But you are sunlight, my love*."

Harry's shoulders sagged, a soft breath leaving him. "*You do not love me. You are mad, deranged, obsessed—but you are not in love.*"

Tom shook his head, as if refusing to hear what Harry was saying. His eyes were squeezed closed, and when he opened them again he floundered for a moment before launching into speech, "*I am all of those things and so much more, but that does not mean I do not love you. I have loved you since I laid my eyes upon you, I have loved you since before we met, I have loved you since the creation of the stars, and since long before that. My love for you is*

unconditional, unbound, untamed by time, untouched by others, violent and bloody—but it is no less love."

The way he said it, pressing upon every word, the loving confession spoken with such genuine belief it made Harry's heart clench with sorrow, with *yearning*. The pained look on his face was not an act, and he stalled before saying his next line, taken aback by how abruptly the heartbreak he'd felt since the kiss hit him all over again.

Taking the last steps forward, finally meeting Tom in the middle, he spoke softly, almost an apology, *"If it is so, I do not want it. I do not want your tainted love, it is wholly selfish—you make something so beautiful, so pure such as love, ugly.*"

Tom made to reach out, but Harry flinched back in a practised motion, and his hands fell limply at his sides, though he was not yet ready to admit defeat. "*But it is for you—how can anything for you be ugly*?" He looked genuinely confused by the concept, looking at Harry pleadingly, silently begging him to understand. "*Everything about you is beautiful, my love for you can be nothing but a thing of beauty. You stepped into this castle and suddenly everything about it was breathtaking—the sight of you alone brought light into its dreary walls. You bring beauty into the world, into my world. Artwork I had never glanced at, I stopped to contemplate. I watched the gardens, and the flowers. I entertained the people. All these things, I had never thought of as beautiful—but how could I not? When your sunlight reflected on everything you had come into contact with?*"

Harry wiped at his eyes that had started leaking, a steady stream tumbling down his cheeks. A furious motion, and he could no longer look at Tom, turning to the back wall; it was then that the audience caught sight of the dagger at his back with a gasp. Undeterred, he went on, "*If your love is so beautiful, what is this?*" Furious, he gestured to the wall before turning back to Tom, bringing them that inch closer. *"The blood stains your hands, your clothes, the walls of your castle! Where did the beauty go? Did it flee from your undeserving grasp?*"

Biting his lip in sorrow, with nowhere else to go, Tom dropped to his knees, repentant. He looked up at Harry from there, begging for mercy. "*My dear Elio, can you not see? Even in this there is beauty! It is devotion, proof of my love for you. I would paint the grounds of this very castle, as well as the sky above, with the blood of all those who dare glance in your direction, and it would make for the most beautiful picture. It would be a canvas of devotion.*" He reached out and held onto Harry's dress, staining the white cloth with the blood on his hands.

Harry, unwillingly, reached out and cupped his cheek in his own bloodstained hand, tilting his chin up. When he spoke, it was a whisper, full of regret, "*I would have married you, you fool. I would have been content, to just have you.*"

Sensing an opening, Tom's hands held on tighter, leaning into Harry's hand reverently. "*Elio, if I loved you any less, I would kill you. And if I loved you any more, I would kill everyone else.*"

Quietly, Harry said, *"You have already killed all those around us*," while dragging his thumb over Tom's sharp cheekbone in a tender gesture, full of love.

Tom didn't falter, looking up at him with all the devotion in the world. "*I cannot love you any more*."

Biting his lip, Harry's other hand reached behind his back, the tips of his fingers brushing against the hilt of the dagger. "*And if I do not love you*?" He wrapped his fingers around it, pulling it gently from the chain, keeping it in his hand behind his back.

Tom didn't even flinch, gripping his thigh through the fabric. Looking up at him, eyes wide and sincere, full of undying love—and Harry wondered, for a second, how he did it. "*If I cannot have you I will decimate every single person in the world. If I cannot have you, no one can. I will have you or I will die.*"

Harry stared at him, stroking his cheekbone lovingly for a second, a smile consisting of nothing but suffering on his lips. In a whisper, loud only because of the silence, he said, "*Then you shall die, Alarik. And I am sorry for it.*"

Tom didn't have time to face betrayal, as, quick as anything, Harry pulled the dagger from behind his back and pressed it right into his heart. As he did so, he cradled Tom's head in his hand, crouching down as Tom curved in on himself, eyes drawn to the dagger, before he looked back up at him, clutching onto his wrist in an attempt to do something. There was nothing he could do though, and before the moment could stretch on any longer, he murmured, "*Elio*," and Harry accompanied him down as he crumpled to the floor.

There were some gasps, but the theatre was mainly eerily silent.

Harry laid Tom down gently, stroking his hair out of his face, pressing a kiss to his forehead before sitting back on his knees. He sighed, chest heaving as tears continued leaking out of his eyes. He wiped them away slowly, taking a moment to compose himself, before he stood up.

He stood over Tom's body for a few seconds, letting the silence stretch, before he turned away and started walking, slowly, carefully, towards the stage exit where he could see glimpses of his friends.

It was when he got halfway, five steps in, that his bracelets made a sound.

He stopped in his tracks, standing still for a moment, before turning around slowly. He looked at Tom from over his shoulder, a sob racking through his chest.

"*Love is not all we make it out to be.*" He started talking slowly, pensive, hurt. "*Love is beautiful, and pure, sunlight that warms your skin, a cold breeze that takes your breath away. Love is made of the smell of flowers and a shared look.*" He sighed, turning his back on the audience as he moved his foot, turning to face Tom properly. "*But love is also ugly—it is violent, and bloody, and murderous. It is jealous and obsessive, it is painful and full of sorrow. It is human, and there is nothing more flawed, nothing more tragic. And I am no less a fool for it."*

From slow and careful to rushed, he walked back over to Tom's body briskly, bracelets jingling incessantly. The words tumbled out of his mouth, lively and disbelieving, "*Perhaps it*

was fate, perhaps doom, maybe we were destined to die before our story started. Perhaps we were already dead."

Quickly, he leant down and wrenched the dagger from Tom's body, spinning away from him, stepping in front of him, hiding him from view, facing the audience head on. The spotlight focused solely on him, hiding the rest of the stage, blinding in its directness.

He drew the dagger along his own forearm unflinchingly, the blood accumulated from Tom's stock bleeding onto his skin. He dropped the dagger onto the floor, the clang of it loud in the silence. He looked back up, at the audience, just as the white lights at the back of the stage started brightening and the spotlight started fading, and delivered his last line, "*But there is no greater tragedy, no flaw more fatal, than love.*"

As the spotlight faded for good, the only lighting that of the bright white lights shining upon his back, his eyelashes fluttered, and he fell back into Tom's awaiting arms, who had used the darkness to get up.

Tom caught him—of course he did—and they held the position for a few seconds, Tom looking down at him with stars in his eyes, before the curtain drew for the last time.

The theatre broke out into wild applause, and Harry was sure he heard Sirius shouting and whistling, though he was accompanied by many others.

But all that noise, it faded to the back of Harry's mind. Tom was still holding him, dipped back, and there was something in his expression, open and wholly vulnerable, the things he only let slip in flashes now on full display; adoration, awe—*love*.

The only thing between them was their heavy breathing.

Tom's eyes roamed over his face, eyes wide with something of a revelation, as if he'd finally understood something that had been evading him for too long. When their eyes met again, Harry froze.

Tom, though, simply looked at him with that same look in his eyes. And, breathless, though clear as day, said, "I think I'm in love with you."

It was as if the whole world stopped—the deafening applause faded into the background, the lights dimmed into darkness. Anything that wasn't Tom was entirely eclipsed from Harry's mind.

"What?" Barely a murmur, barely even a thought—it was the only thing Harry could come up with, entirely sure he was dreaming.

But then Tom was setting him back on his own two feet—that Harry wasn't entirely sure could hold him—and they were being jumped by their friends.

The curtain opened and Harry was assaulted by the bright lights illuminating both the stage and the rest of the theatre. He was sandwiched between who he thought might be Alphard

and Theo, and the noise was only just coming back to him. He was wading underwater, completely numb with shock.

He looked out at the audience; all on their feet, their Professors beaming at them, pride radiating from them in waves. Hermione and Ron shouting and clapping uproariously, Remus looking like he might be in shock, and Sirius screaming his head off, looking directly at him —the rowdiest of everyone in the crowd.

Harry blinked, the scene playing in slow motion. He was forced into a bow, and he was gripping who he thought was Alphard's back like a lifeline.

When his head slowed its dizzying spinning, he turned to look to his left. And through it all Tom remained the clearest picture in the blur of his dreamlike haziness. He tried, desperately, to catch Tom's eye, but he was, in turn, desperately avoiding his.

—Scene five—

Harry frankly couldn't remember much of what happened after. Though he wouldn't realise it just then, too shell-shocked by the bomb Tom had dropped, later he would know; there was a before and after in his life, built around that fateful moment where Tom supposedly confessed.

And such an earth shattering revelation needed an adaptation time, and coming down from the high of hundreds of applause wasn't the ideal environment to do so.

As such, leaving the stage, the brief stay in the changing rooms, the traipse up to the Great Hall—it existed in a cloud of memory too senseless and dreamlike to truly exist in Harry's mind.

[He remembered in flashes; Theo screaming in delight in the changing rooms, jumping up and down as he shouted nonsense, as if he was on top of the world. Tom, his back conveniently to Harry whenever he worked up the nerve to glance in his direction. Too bright lights, deafening applause, the sound of his jewellery coming off, the relief of taking his contacts out.]

It felt like between one blink and the next he was falling into Tom's arms and then walking through the doors of the Great Hall under Theo's arm.

It was already jam-packed by the time they walked through the doors, Harry pushing his glasses up his nose, uncomfortably aware of the way they kept slipping down. He wasn't sure he'd said a word since his disbelieving '*what?*' but before he could try his hand at facing the seemingly insurmountable task of forming a single word in his mind and moving it through his system so that it actually came out of his mouth, a glass of whiskey was pressed into his hand by an overexcited Theo.

The sound in the Great Hall was a buzz of chatter that reverberated off the walls and formed a strange echo in Harry's mind. His breathing felt loud to him, and though he already felt drunk he knocked back his drink in an attempt to return to lucidity.

"Mr. Potter, is it?"

Harry turned towards the voice, finding himself in front of a short man, round glasses sitting high on his overly large nose. Staring at the man, Harry realised he was no longer flanked by his friends, but was completely alone by the drinks table.

The man said something else but Harry didn't catch it, still feeling like he was wading through deep water.

"I'm sorry?" he said, the words feeling heavy and foreign on his tongue. He blinked, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Sorry, I didn't quite catch that."

"Oh, no problem, not at all," the man said amiably enough. "I was just introducing myself, Ernest Carcan, Mr. Potter."

Harry shook his hand, fingers numb and movements too slow to be perceived as even remotely normal. “A pleasure to meet you, sir,” he said faintly.

“Ah, I expect you must be recovering from the stress of the play!” the man said, and Harry nodded, latching onto the excuse he was given. “Ah, and what a play it was, my boy, I must say!”

Harry tried for a smile, feeling more like a grimace than anything else. His hearing was still fucked, his eyesight a bit too unfocused. He gripped the table in one hand, the now empty glass in the other. “Thank you, sir.”

“You did a truly phenomenal job, Harry—can I call you Harry? Brilliant—all of you, of course, were marvellous, but there was certainly a special something in you.” Ernest Carcan didn’t seem to need Harry for much of the conversation, happy to hold a discussion all by himself, ranting on for several more long moments about the high points in the play, and what he would have personally done differently.

“Anyway,” he finally said, a broad grin plastered on his face as he fished inside his breast pocket and came back with a card that he handed to Harry between two fingers, as if taking part in some kind of sketchy drug deal, “I see real potential in you, Harry, and I’d be more than happy for you to give me a call if you’re looking for any auditions in the near future. I’m sure we would work very well together.”

Harry took the card in his hand holding onto the glass, the moisture from the ice instantly wetting the cardboard. “Er—thank you, sir, I’ll definitely keep it in mind.”

“Yes, you do that, Harry, I’m sure we’ll be in touch soon enough, though I must go and catch up with some old colleagues, if you don’t mind?” He accompanied his words with a well practised smile, and Harry nodded, bidding him goodbye. It wasn’t like he was ever going to call the man, anyway.

Ernest Carcan left, and Harry was once again alone, left with the ringing in his ears and the blur in his eyes. Blinking slowly, he realised that he hadn’t even taken his makeup off—which explained the itching in his eyes.

“Vultures, the lot of them.”

Harry turned to his left, straightening out as quickly as he could, trying to look less like he was high off his fucking arse—which he actually wasn’t, even though it felt a lot like he was. “Mrs. Lestrange, hi.”

“Oh, Harry,” she said, chastising, “how many times? Call me Lorraine.”

“Right, Lorraine. How did you like the play?”

She took a deep breath, a grin stretching across her lips. “Simply fabulous, darling. Gosh, I can’t wait for tomorrow night to see it again. I’ve got to say, I was so surprised most of the time I could barely keep up with what was going on. You were all incredible, honest. Ah, and my Ricky, speaking Italian! God, you can’t imagine how proud I am, dear.”

Harry smiled, taking his first normal breath in what felt like hours, some of the tension bleeding from him. “That’s nice, I bet you are. Rick was amazing, he spent hours teaching me the correct pronunciations.”

“Oh, you did perfect,” she said sincerely, setting a hand on his arm. “So beautiful as well, honestly, don’t laugh! I mean, you’re very handsome as you are, but you’ve really got the potential of being *pretty*—you know, a lot of lads don’t have that luxury. But believe me, pretty gets you a long way, darling.” She leant closer to him, an amused look in her eyes as she whispered, “I think you might have made Chris realise a couple things about himself.”

Harry snorted, surprised. He didn’t say that Chris had asked him out months ago, it wouldn’t be fair to do so, so he simply took the compliment in stride. “Thank you, that’s very kind of you.”

She smiled, a motherly sort of thing, though her eyes narrowed as she looked down, right at the card still gathering moisture between his fingers. She plucked it out of his grasp, shaking her head. “You don’t want to work with him, love. He’s got some nasty allegations against him that Ernest Carcan, and he's got some nerve coming here.”

“What? Why?” Harry asked, finding his lucidity returned if he focused wholeheartedly on the conversation.

She had a hard look about her, pinched. “Abuse mainly, from actors under his wing. He likes the pretty boys, like you, if you catch my drift.”

“Oh,” Harry said, frowning, before it truly hit him, “oh God. Jesus Christ, *seriously*?”

She nodded gravely. “Anyway, you don’t need it. Me and Maisie can sort you boys out with our connections, and I’m sure your Godfather will be more than happy to look after you as well. Don’t get roped into signing anything tonight, will you?”

“I won’t, I promise,” he said, and she looked satisfied with his answer. “Where is Sirius, anyway? Do you know? I’d’ve thought he would’ve come to see me by now.”

She laughed lightly. “Looking for you, running around like a chicken without its head. He’s gone past us three times, did you not see him?”

There was a concern in her eyes as she asked him, and Harry, feeling lost, shook his head. “Sorry,” he said, “I’ve been feeling a bit weird since the end of the play. Nerves crashing, you know?”

“Ah,” she said, looking relieved. “Here, let’s get you another drink then.” She took his glass from him, turning to the table to fish ice out of one of the buckets at their disposal.

Harry watched her, surreptitiously taking deep breaths to try and knock his mind back into place.

Far was he from expecting to be bouldered over. But, one second he was standing, and the next he was on the floor with Sirius in a tangled mess.

“Sirius!” Harry exclaimed, a tad too loud in his surprise as he blinked up at his Godfather. “What the actual fuck?”

“Me what the fuck?” Sirius said, having the nerve to look offended as he sat atop Harry, looking in no way to be in a hurry to get off. “Are you taking the piss you knobhead? What the fuck was that play? Are you trying to kill me? Do you want to see me dead, is that it?”

Harry gawked at him, in utter disbelief, before he laughed, a full blown bout of laughter. When it passed, his ears started picking up the chatter around them, and his eyes could clearly see the people staring at them—as clearly as he could with his glasses knocked askew.

He looked back at Sirius, suddenly so grateful that he was there. “Did you like it?” he asked with a crooked grin, already knowing the answer.

Sirius stared at him, leaning down to grip his shoulders and shake him so thoroughly his teeth rattled. “Did I like it?” he kept repeating over and over again.

“Alright, alright,” Remus was saying. The shaking stopped, and Harry saw Remus prying Sirius off him, holding out a hand to him once Sirius was up. Harry took it, still giggling from the shaking.

“Well, did you?” he asked, grinning.

Sirius huffed out a laugh, before pulling him into a rough embrace. “That was the best fucking play I’ve ever seen,” he said, voice muffled in Harry’s hair. “You were incredible, I don’t even have words, honest. Just—absolutely mind-blowing.”

Harry pulled back, pride swelling in his chest as a bashful smile spread across his lips. “Thanks, Sirius. It means a lot that you liked it. What about you, Moony?”

Remus had a disbelieving sort of look in his eyes, sparkling as he looked at him. “Just—honestly incredible. So well put together—I’m so proud, kiddo.”

Harry was beaming at him, nothing more important in that moment than making the both of them proud.

Sirius’s hands were on his face a second later, forcing eye contact. “I mean this, Harry,” he said seriously, “nothing—and I mean *nothing*—could ever compare to how fucking proud I am, I’m beyond happy.”

Harry melted a bit, feeling like a kid again, trying to make his Uncle Sirius proud by rehearsing his scripts with him. “Thank you,” he said quietly.

Sirius smiled at him, patting his cheek lovingly. “I was looking for you everywhere! Ah, I bet *you* found it funny, didn’t you,” he said to Lorraine, eyes narrowed, “watching me run about. You couldn’t have called me over?”

Lorraine laughed, shaking her head as she took a drink of her wine. Even doing that she looked unfairly elegant.

Sirius rolled his eyes, turning back to Harry. “I’ve got Ron and Hermione running around looking for you, they should show up soon enough. I managed to talk to every one of your friends though, Tom seemed a bit out of it mind, but that’s to be expected, coming down from such a brilliant immersive performance can take some time—” Harry perked up at the sound of Tom’s name, a furious blush taking over as his heart pounded, whiting out his senses for a second as he recalled *the thing*, before actively focusing back on Sirius— “but God, you were all so good. Alphie was amazing, I made sure to tell him, of course, though I think he’s being drilled by his mum at the minute.”

“What?” Harry said, latching onto the last thing Sirius said. “What’s she drilling him about?”

Sirius shrugged, a tick in his jaw. “What he could’ve done better, essentially.”

Lorraine clicked her tongue from beside them, a pinch to her brows. “I’ll go and save him. I’m sorry to say it, Sirius, but that sister of yours is an absolute horror.”

“I’ll not dispute that,” Sirius said as she left. “How are you feeling anyway, kiddo?”

Harry went to grab his glass on the table, but rethought the motion and snatched his hand back when he saw the look in Sirius’s eye; a fleeting thing, a glance, nothing more, but full of longing. He cleared his throat. “Erm—alright, I suppose. A bit shaken up? Tired, maybe, too.”

“You look a bit out of it,” Remus commented, not unkindly. “Which I’m sure is normal. It was longer than I expected, and you didn’t have an intermission. I bet you’re shattered.”

Harry nodded, latching onto this excuse as well; he didn’t fancy getting into the whole, *yeah, I’m feeling a bit weird because the boy I’ve been in love with for months just confessed to me in the strangest and most unprompted way possible not an hour ago*.

“Harry!” Hermione was rushing over, Ron in tow, both of them with flushed cheeks.

Harry grinned at them, holding his arms out as Hermione crashed into him, hugging him tight. Ron, like always, put an arm around the both of them for the embrace.

“Oh my *god*, you were amazing!” Hermione said, a bit hysterically, as she pulled back to hold him at arm's length. “Really, truly the best performance you’ve ever done. It was absolutely mind-blowing, and God, the *writing* of the play itself is so beautiful, you’ll have to tell me exactly which bits you wrote, and do you think I can have a physical copy, there’s so much—”

“‘Mione, Jesus, calm down,” Ron said, smoothing her hair out with a chuckle. “Look at him, he’s completely out of it, how many drinks have you had, mate?”

“Just one,” Harry said distractedly. “And thank you, ‘mione, I’m glad you liked it. And yes, you can have a physical copy, and yes I’ll tell you who wrote what.”

“Oh, you do look a bit pale, Harry, are you alright? And your eyes are all glassy,” Hermione said, frowning at him.

“Just the adrenaline crash,” he said as convincingly as he could.

Hermione hummed, eyeing him in a way that said, *are you sure*?

He gave her a look that he knew she’d understand as, *after*.

“Play was mint anyway, mate,” Ron said kindly, clapping him on the shoulder. “Really interesting, loved the murder. Did you have any pants on under that dress?”

Harry snorted, couldn’t help it, really. “Yes I had underwear on, you idiot.”

“Oh good, I was worried you were gonna flash us during the dance you and Tom did,” Ron said, laughing.

“That must’ve been difficult for you, Harry,” Sirius said, setting a hand on his shoulder, squeezing.

“What? The dance? Yeah, it was a lot of work.”

“No, I mean, to do *that* with you-know-who,” Sirius said pointedly, head tilted to the side.

“Oh, oh—a bit,” Harry conceded, swallowing. He really could not think of Tom at that moment, he was faring much better when he pretended he didn’t even exist.

Ron got in his face a bit, squinting as he looked at him.

Harry leant back, laughing. “What are you doing you weirdo?”

“That makeup suits you weirdly enough,” he commented. “Breaking gender norms, innit?” He said this quite wisely, glancing sideways at Hermione for her approval.

Harry snorted when Hermione rolled her eyes. “That’s right, mate.”

“Oop, watch out,” Sirius mumbled, “police are coming.” He tilted his head, motioning behind Harry, who turned around to see his teachers coming up to them.

“There you are, Harry, my boy,” Dumbledore said as they got to their level. He was beaming, eyes twinkling, brought out by the horrifically bright shade of yellow in his robes.

“Professor,” Harry said, smiling at him. “How did you like it?” He glanced towards Snape and McGonagall as he asked.

“Truly truly impressive, Harry,” Dumbledore said sincerely. “I have just come to you after speaking with Tom, I was hoping to catch you together, and am quite surprised I didn’t. But alas! Truly inspiring for the younger years present, I can easily say we are all very impressed with what you came up with.”

“Oh, thank you, Professor.”

“My congratulations, Potter,” Snape said, a smirk at the corner of his lips. “Consider me adequately impressed by your performance.”

Harry smiled at him, nodding in thanks.

“Remember our play, Snivvy?” Sirius asked with a crooked grin.

Snape rolled his eyes. “Unfortunately, yes.” He looked at Harry, and said, “Roped into a comedy, honestly.”

Harry laughed, though his was drowned out by Sirius’s bark of laughter, all good-natured.

Remus snorted. “Yeah, can you imagine that, you in a comedy, Sev?”

Snape bit back the smile tugging at him, though his eyes radiated amusement as he said, “Quite.”

“You boys,” McGonagall said fondly, before turning to Harry. “Really magnificent stuff, Potter, the emotion you portray, way beyond your years, I’ll tell you that. Now, that dance number, let me tell you, I’m impressed—”

Soon enough, hours had passed, and Harry hadn’t had a single moment to himself. He spoke at length with his Professors about the technicalities of the play, surprisingly proud at seeing them so engaged, proof that they’d truly enjoyed it.

He got whisked out under Theo’s arm at some point, where he was led around the room and shown off to a bunch of people he didn’t know but Theo seemed familiar with. Business cards, personal numbers—his pockets were full of them, and that wasn’t even to mention the masses of stories he was made to hear.

He tried to stay close to Sirius, every free moment he got spent chatting away with him, though he didn’t drink any alcohol around him, only took sips of his friends’ drinks whenever they managed to tear him away for long enough.

He saw Lysandra at some point, and met her parents who wouldn’t stop beaming at him. They kept thanking him profusely, for giving their daughter a chance and for including her in all the preparations—they seemed to think Harry was to blame, and he didn’t necessarily contradict them.

Chris came up to congratulate him personally, a very indiscreet hand on his bicep as he complimented him intensely, and Harry couldn’t not notice the way his pupils were a bit dilated whilst he was avidly looking at him. He took it in stride anyway, ignoring the weight of eyes on him as he accepted Chris’s congratulations.

He met producers, actors, directors—too many names he couldn’t remember them all—and a surprising amount of world-renowned talents, all eager to shake his hand and commend him for his performance. Even this was a bit surreal, and he never quite shook the feeling of absolute shock clinging to him.

Throughout it all, despite always staying well away, he knew where Tom was. Not once did he look at him directly, honestly too afraid to do so. He couldn't even think about it, couldn't recall the scene. It was so indescribable—forbidden, almost, and he wondered, distantly, if they were going to pretend nothing had happened.

As the crowd started to thin out, and Theo's voice could be heard wherever you were standing in the Great Hall for how drunk he was, Hermione and Ron found him again, cornering him in a back end of the room. And Harry, for all that he didn't want to talk about it—didn't even want to think about it, really—felt a non-negligible amount of relief at the sight of them.

He felt exhausted, after countless introductions, and laughing at the right time in frankly bland and uninteresting stories from people he didn't care much about, and saying "excuse me" approximately a hundred times.

"Here, Harry," Hermione said as she got to his level, handing him a drink. "You look like you need it."

"Cheers, 'mione."

"Right," Ron said, all business, crossing his arms across his chest, "tell us what's going on then. You looked white as a sheet when we saw you earlier, and even during the applause at the end of the play you looked completely out of it."

Hermione hummed beside him, looking concerned. "I spoke to Alphard too earlier on, he said you were checked out after the play, and I've known you long enough to know that even a good performance doesn't do that to you. Did something happen before the play? Or during?"

The crowd gathered had thinned out considerably in the last half hour, and they were in a shadowed corner of the Hall, leaning against the cool stone wall. The chatter bounced off the walls, glasses clinking and laughs echoing.

Harry looked out at the people amassed, eyes immediately landing on Tom who was talking with Amelia by the bar. He looked away quickly, petrified by the prospect of meeting his eye.

"Harry," Hermione urged, clicking her fingers in front of his face.

"Sorry," he said, attention turning back to his friends. "I don't really—I—" The memory of it hit him like a train, and he closed his eyes against it, knuckles turning white around the glass in his hand. The lurch in his stomach almost knocked him sideways, and for the first time since *it* had happened, he realised, with sickening clarity, that it was *real*—it wasn't one of his countless fantasies, or daydreams, or literal dreams. It had happened. Tom had said the words.

Harry felt sick.

"Harry, you're worrying us, mate," Ron said, troubled. "Come on, you know you can tell us anything."

He took a deep shaky breath. The chatter in the Hall was grating on his nerves, and he was starting to feel that cloying sense of panic tightening his throat and tying his tongue. “Can we go outside?” he asked—pleaded, really.

They agreed readily, looking more worried by the second.

“Okay, did something bad happen? You’re worrying me, Harry,” Hermione said, rubbing her hands together as they got out into the cool late night air. There was a breeze, rustling the leaves on the trees in the forest. Warm light emanated from the huge windows in the Great Hall, but the grounds were cast in darkness, the lake nothing but a black, still abyss in the distance.

“Nothing bad—as such,” he said, sitting down on the steps beside his friends before getting up and pacing. It was all starting to catch up with him—the numbness abating, leaving place to a nattering jitteriness, part giddiness, part absolute terror.

“Alright, mate, it’s alright, just take your time,” Ron said encouragingly—always the patient one between the two of them. Hermione was the best for genuine advice, but Ron was the one who could always get Harry to actually talk.

He took a deep breath, stomach lurching again at the memory that he flinched away from. “Okay, okay, you know what happened in May, right?”

“Of course, with Tom, right?” Hermione said readily.

Harry nodded, hands moving nervously in front of him as he paced. “Okay, and you remember what he said—that he was attracted to me, but that I basically wasn’t worth what a relationship or whatever could mean, right?”

“Yes…”

“Right, and you know that I’m—that I’m kind of in love with him, so that hurt a lot,” he wrung his hands in front of him, the words pouring out of him sporadically, the sick feeling creeping up his throat, leaving a bitter taste on his tongue. “But we decided that our friendship meant too much to us, which it does and—and it was weird for a bit, but it got a lot better, we were back to normal, aside from a few boundaries that I put into place—not explicitly, but you know what I mean—anyway, that was the end of it, right? We’re friends and I’ll get over it.”

“Yes,” Hermione said carefully, “but you’re not over him, is that the problem? I understand it hurts Harry, but you’ll get there in time—”

“No, no, no,” he cut her off, shaking his head. “It’s not that, well—I am still really very in love with him, but it’s not that.”

“Alright,” Ron said, looking at him with undivided attention, the kind sort of unconditional support and care—it was the look Harry imagined he’d have if he were to tell Ron he’d killed someone and he needed help hiding the body. It put him at ease. “What is it then, Harry?”

Harry took a deep breath, stopping his pacing to stand before them. “At the end of the play,” he said slowly, disbelieving of the fact that this was a real memory he was recounting and not a very vivid daydream, “when I fell back into Tom’s arms, and the curtain closed—” another lurch of nausea, and he took another deep breath— “something happened, we were just staring at each other and—oh my god.” He buried his head in his hands, the contradictory feelings of excitement and terror battling it out inside him.

“Harry, God, what is it?” Hermione asked urgently, sitting on the edge of the step. She looked like she wanted to shake it out of him.

“Tom—” Harry’s voice cracked on the name. “He said—he said, ‘*I think I’m in love with you*’.”

Silence, utter silence, save for an owl hooting in the forest far away—even the wind seemed to be holding its breath.

He peaked through his fingers at his friends, at their gobsmacked looks, jaws hanging open in open shock. Harry, feeling an odd sense of unshakeable giddiness at having said it, laughed. It wasn’t quite amused or genuine, more nervous than anything, and he felt like he might shake apart with it. His whole body was buzzing with the feeling, and he felt so overwhelmed tears pricked at his eyes.

“Oh my god,” Hermione whispered, her hands covering her mouth belatedly. “Oh my fucking god,” she repeated.

Harry laughed again, just because she’d sworn, which knocked a laugh out of Ron, who looked between him and Hermione, looking absolutely delighted.

“Harry,” he said, eyes bright, “this is amazing!”

Harry sobered in an instant, the excitement that had overwhelmed him overshadowed by a sickening worry. “No it’s not,” he said, voice thick with the prelude of regret. “It’s not—because—because—”

“Harry, calm down, take a breath,” Hermione said, standing up and holding onto his arms to steady him, get him to slow down. “Okay, you’re going to breathe, and we’re going to figure this out methodically, alright?”

He nodded, exhaling a shaky breath, feeling like he was falling apart at the seams.

“Come on, mate,” Ron said encouragingly, shuffling over on the step. “Come and sit down with us, it’ll help you calm down.”

Harry nodded again, letting Hermione sit him down on the step between them. They were quiet for a moment longer, Hermione rubbing his right arm comfortingly, while Ron patted his knee.

“Alright,” Hermione said quietly once Harry’s breathing evened out. “We’re going to sort this into three categories, Harry, you’re going to tell us what could be the worst case scenario

following what Tom said, a middle case scenario, and a best case scenario, how does that sound?"

He huffed a small laugh. "What the fuck is a middle case scenario?"

Hermione smiled at him. "It's the most neutral thing that would leave you a bit disappointed but not completely heartbroken. Shall we start with the best case scenario?

Taking another deep breath, he nodded, taking comfort in their presence. "The best case, I think, is that he meant it. That we talk about, mainly, or maybe I just tell him I feel the same and we decide to give it a try."

"Okay, so a relationship?" Hermione said. "That's a good best case scenario, and it's not completely unattainable, anything else?"

Harry hummed, giving her an apologetic look as he said, "I think I'd really like it if we had sex."

Taken by surprise, she snorted, while Ron barked out a laugh.

"Now that's a best case scenario," Ron said, still laughing.

Harry smiled wide, knocking his shoulder into Ron's.

"Okay, good," Hermione said, recovering from her amusement. "That's good, so a relationship that enters into immediate effect by way of intercourse, correct?"

"Sounds about right," Harry said, amused by her business-like manner.

She grinned, clearly playing into it to amuse him. "Alright, what about a middle case scenario? Can you think of anything?"

Harry hummed, looking back out at the dark grounds. He loved Hermione, her method was really effective for removing any emotional attachment to the situations he had to describe. It was methodical, like she'd said.

"I think," he started, hesitating, "it would be that I'd misheard what he'd said, and so we'd just go back to normal. Not in a '*let's forget what happened*' way, but a natural way."

"Okay, and what is the likelihood of that outcome?"

Harry thought back on the memory, and no matter how he looked at it, there was no way he was mistaken. Despite the noise, despite the lights and excitement of finishing the play—there was absolutely no way he'd misheard. The words, spoken in Tom's voice, rang loud and clear in his mind.

"None," he admitted quietly, the prospect dawning on him. There would be no middle case scenario, no backtracking from what had happened. There would be no take backs, and certainly no forgetting.

Hermione set her hand on his, holding it carefully. “Okay,” she whispered, “sometimes it’s good to not have a middle ground. And I think that in the context of you and Tom, it’s best if you move on—in whatever way that is, whether it’s forward together, or apart.”

Harry took a shuddering breath, squeezing his eyes shut. The idea of not having Tom anymore, in whatever capacity, was heartbreaking.

“And what’s the worst case scenario?” she asked softly.

Ron’s hand squeezed his knee, encouraging and grounding.

“It’s that he tries to do what he did in May,” Harry said with a despairing sigh. “If he tries to say that he didn’t mean it, or that despite his feelings he can’t do it—that’s the worst case scenario because I can’t go along with it this time.” There was an air of finality to his words, and while it broke his heart to imagine having to do that, he meant it.

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione said sadly, dropping her head onto his shoulder, linking their fingers together.

“Listen, mate,” Ron said, voice a bit gruff—which meant that he was about to get real, and it made him uncomfortable to do so— “I don’t know Tom all that much, but I’m pretty sure he meant it. Will he stick to it? Commit? I can’t say, honest. I think in May he felt the same way, but just panicked. I think he’s scared shitless, a bit like you are, you know? You’ve said it yourself, intimacy is scary for you, you don’t like being vulnerable—knowing you, you’ve probably found someone who’s exactly the same. *But* I’d be surprised if he made the same mistake twice, you know what I mean?”

Harry stared at him, eyes wide and hopeful. “Do you really think so?” he asked in a whisper.

Ron nodded, smiling at him. “There’s no way he didn’t mean it—maybe it was impulsive, alright. But that doesn’t mean it’s not true. He’d be an absolute idiot to not follow through—he’s already done the hardest part.”

When Harry looked at Hermione for her approval of what Ron had said, he found her beaming in Ron’s direction, looking so in love with him it made his heart hurt a bit—if only because he was sure that was how he looked at Tom (and how, on rare occasions, Tom had looked at him).

She nodded, tearing her eyes away from Ron to look back at Harry. “He’s absolutely right,” she said proudly. “I think what happened in May really affected Tom, more than you perhaps saw in your own heartbreak, Harry. I think you’ve both been skirting along the notion of a relationship passively, and I think that much happening at once scared him. If he’s speaking up now, it’s that he’s at least been thinking about it. You need to talk about it, is my advice. And I know it’s rather generic, but you do. Be clear that after this, if he doesn’t want to commit, then that’s okay—you’ll be upset, yes, but it’s okay—but in that case you cannot be friends with him. If he’s allowed his boundaries, so are you, Harry.”

Holding his breath, Harry nodded, exhaling heavily after, trying to flush out the devastating heartbreak preemptively forming in his chest.

“I know this is scary,” she said calmly, stroking his hand with her thumb, “and it’s going to be very clumsy, because it’s you two. You just need to be clear with each other—no more ignoring things, no more skirting around things, just be straight with each other—”

“I don’t think it can be called being straight, ‘mione,” Ron mumbled, and they all paused, before laughing stupidly. It cleared the air, and the suffocating dread in his heart eased a bit, enough to feel a sliver of optimism about it all.

They were quiet afterwards, all just taking in the surreality of the situation.

“Have you not spoken at all then, since he confessed?” Hermione asked quietly after a while.

Harry shook his head. “I tried to catch his eye at first, but he was clearly avoiding me, and since then I’ve been avoiding him too.”

She hummed, the noise complementing the soft hush of the outside air. “I thought something might be going on between the both of you, so I kept an eye on Tom. He couldn’t keep his eyes off you, you know?”

Harry’s stomach lurched again, and he laughed nervously. “Yeah?”

She did that hum again, a pleased sort of smile etching onto her face as she nodded. She squeezed his hand, resting her head back on his shoulder. “I know you always think along the lines of the worst case scenario, Harry,” she spoke slowly, quietly, “but give yourself a chance with Tom—don’t passively let him fly by you. You deserve this to work, you owe yourself to try.”

Ron put an arm around his shoulder, hand on Hermione’s head as he did so, and coaxed Harry onto his shoulder. “I don’t know much about theatre, and acting,” he murmured, leaning against Harry, “not like you do anyway—but it seemed real tonight. You know, you had to say those things to each other—straight out of those old-timey romance novels ‘mione loves—” he huffed out a laugh, and Harry felt the way his hand passed through Hermione’s hair from their proximity— “and it just—I couldn’t shake the feeling that I wasn’t watching two people act, it felt too genuine, from both sides.”

“Tom’s a very good actor,” Harry mumbled.

“No,” Ron said, “it was different, when he was onstage with you. I could see his character when he was with the others, and he played very well—but with you it was different, I don’t think you can fake that.”

“And if he’s at the stage where he can blurt out that he’s in love with you,” Hermione added pointedly, “it probably means that he wants to be with you at least as much as you want to be with him.”

The stars above were shining clearly, the full moon bright in the distance. The owl hooted again, and Harry thought he heard another one answer from even further away. A glass shattered from inside the Great Hall and a burst of laughter followed. A cricket sounded out in the grass near them, and a frog from near the lake croaked.

All the while Harry huddled between Ron and Hermione, trying to reconcile the situation he was in with reality. They'd helped—God, they'd helped so much—but they'd also given him *hope*, and he had no idea how he'd deal with the heartbreak. This wasn't just a hookup gone wrong—an impromptu snogging session—it dealt with matters of the heart, and Harry knew all too well how things too close to the heart hurt.

When she'd deemed enough time had passed—i.e. Harry had stalled long enough—she tapped his hand gently, still clasped in hers. "Listen, Harry, we're all going to go back inside. Say night to Sirius and Remus, I'll help along if Sirius won't leave you alone, don't worry, and then you're going to go and get Tom for a talk. There's no point putting it off any longer, you've both had time to sit with it, both had time to, you know, think about what you want."

He sighed, taking a shaky breath, and with confidence he didn't feel, nodded. "You're right," he whispered. "Thank you, so much, both of you. I don't know what I'd do without you, honest."

"Dead, probably," Ron said, grinning as he reclaimed his arm and stood up, holding out both of his hands for each of them.

They got pulled up, and Ron clapped him on the back when they turned towards the castle. They'd sat on some steps by a side door, avoiding the main entrance where people came and left from time to time.

They made it back into the Great Hall, Harry's hands shaking at his sides. Again, he avoided all eye contact with Tom, meticulously keeping track of the general area of where he was with his peripheral vision.

Sirius was entertaining a group of people Harry had met during the evening but couldn't remember the names of, a champagne glass in his hand that was filled with what looked like coke. Harry smiled as they made their way over.

"And there he is!" Sirius exclaimed when he caught sight of them. "The star of the show! Light of my life! My pride and joy!"

"Sirius," Harry grumbled while the people gathered laughed lightly, amused.

"We were just chatting about you, kiddo," he said, tucking him under his arm. "Telling them about how you used to help me rehearse—I knew then, see, that he was destined to be more talented than all of us put together!"

Harry smiled, taking Sirius's drink and taking a sip for himself—just coke, no whiskey in it. "I liked it so much 'cause I got to say 'fuck' when the character I was playing got to."

Sirius barked out a laugh, roughing up Harry's hair affectionately. "That's my Harry."

Harry smiled at him, turning tight when he caught Hermione's pointed look to his side. "I was just er—coming to say night, actually," he said, clearing his throat. "Tired, you know, and we've got the second run tomorrow."

“Oh, of course,” Sirius said, “I’ll walk you back! I’m a bit tired myself you know, a lot of excitement today, and I’m on that medication now, you know, makes me tired.”

“Actually, Sirius,” Hermione said, stepping in, “why don’t we walk Amelia back with us? I don’t think she has anyone to accompany her, we wouldn’t want her to get lost.”

“Oh brilliant idea, Hermione! Come on you lot then, let’s go!” Without preamble, he dragged Harry through the Great Hall, arm still around his shoulder.

Harry, with no little amount of dread, realised they were heading straight for Tom who had Amelia at his side. He looked away quickly, trying to get out of this in a way that wasn’t digging his feet into the floor and making a scene.

Hermione and Ron were rushing to keep up, looking like they were trying to come up with the same sort of idea.

All too soon they were there, and Harry was hyperventilating as silently as he could.

A magnet—always, always, drawn to one another—his eyes landed directly on Tom’s, and saw the same stricken look reflected on his face.

“Amelia! Lovely Amelia!” Sirius exclaimed, startling her. “We’re just leaving, shall we walk you back with us? Wouldn’t want a beautiful woman like you out on your own at this time.”

Sirius, as always, didn’t pick up on any of what was going on, powering on like a monster truck intent on ploughing over everything in its path.

“Oh, oh gosh,” Amelia said, giggling, “you scared me.” She looked up at Tom, setting a hand on his forearm, forcing him to look away from Harry who he had been staring at like a deer frozen in headlights for some moments. “You don’t mind, do you, Tommy?”

“Of course not,” he said, barely more than a whisper, and he cleared his throat around it. Hearing his voice, the same voice that had spoken the words, *I think I might be in love with you*, was far more than harrowing; it was enough to have Harry’s legs shaking and his stomach lurching again.

Hermione nudged him from behind, cutting his panic short.

He looked up in alarm, somehow landing straight on Tom, *again*. “We—” heart racing, feeling absolutely sick to his stomach with that same mix of nerves-excitement-terror— “I was just going back. Coming?”

Tom stared at him, and Harry saw the flicker between his calm and casual forced look, and the persistent stricken look that he couldn’t seem to shake. “Yeah,” he said, sounding breathless.

“Okay then,” Sirius said brightly, letting go of Harry who swayed dangerously without the support, and held his arm out for Amelia to take. “Do you need us to take you back, lads?”

“No it’s fine,” Harry said weakly, as Tom shook his head.

They set off, Harry hugging Remus, Sirius, Ron, and Hermione quickly when they got outside, their paths diverging. He gave Amelia a quick kiss on the cheek, unsure how he was managing to keep his composure.

“It’ll be fine,” Hermione whispered into his shoulder when she hugged him, and that was enough to have him taking his first deep breath in minutes—enough to, once the others set off and he watched them go for too long, turn back to face Tom.

—Scene six—

Harry had never known silence to be quite so loud. They stared at each other for a very long moment, not even the owl from earlier hooting in the distance, before they both, seemingly simultaneously, decided to start walking.

The crunch of their feet in the grass did nothing to alleviate the oppressive nature of their silence, in fact, it enhanced it, the sound amplifying and amplifying until it started ringing and echoing in Harry's ears.

All the time he was thinking: *just talk, just say something.* But when he came up blank he resorted to: *just think of something to say*. For half of the walk to the chapel that was all that rang out in his mind, and he wasn't actually *thinking*.

Finally, he settled on something simple; *we should talk*. But no—that was stupid. He racked his stupid brain and yet he still couldn't think of anything to say.

Did you mean it?

Please say it again.

I'm in love with you too.

Nothing was right—the chapel was approaching, the grass was still fucking crunching under his feet and apparently the animals had all gone into fucking hiding because there wasn't a single fucking sound to be heard across the whole expanse of land.

I'll count to three and then I'll just say something. Okay. One. Two. Three.

Fuck. Start again. One. Two. Three.

...

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck—

They got to the chapel and Tom opened the door. They walked in, still in silence, and toed their shoes off. No one else was back.

Okay, good, I'll just say: are we the first ones back? it'll break the ice. Okay. In three. One. Two. Three.

Fuck.

Experiencing one of the worst cases of being tongue tied in the world, Harry traipsed upstairs silently, nothing but the sound of his footsteps and Tom's following him up the steps.

They got into their room, which felt a lot smaller in that moment than what it actually was. Harry stood, so awkwardly, arms crossed over his chest and shoulders hunched over. He

stared at the window for a few moments, his breathing heavy, made all the worse by the fact he could feel Tom at his back.

He turned around eventually (after counting to three four different times) and faced him.

Tom stared at him, eyes wide but guarded, lost but unwilling to admit it. His hair was curling softly against his forehead, a flush high on his cheekbones, and he looked like he'd be more at ease in his comfy clothes, and not his tight—very flattering—shirt and fancy trousers.

"Okay," Harry said, his voice holding an awful croaky quality to it that he loathed. He didn't have a follow up, but at least he'd reassured himself that his voice still worked.

Tom blinked, swallowed, exhaled loud. "I meant it," he said in a rush, looking to be wrenching the words from the depths of his very soul. Harry's heart kicked up, pounding out of his chest, echoing in his eardrums, and his stomach squirmed almost painfully. "But—"

In the rush of the excitement of it all—of it being *real*—Harry didn't even hear Tom's last word and blurted, "I'm in love with you too."

Tom's jaw snapped shut, the audible click of his teeth loud in the silence, and he just stared with wide eyes.

Harry blinked at him, horrified at his own words echoing back at him. It was excruciating, and he had no idea how they were ever going to get out of this situation. Surely it wasn't so hard usually—surely people just *talked*, easily, openly.

"Really?" Tom asked, a rasp to his voice that managed to knock Harry sideways, his thoughts —and hopes—taking a completely different direction than just *talking*.

His breath hitched, his hands dropped to his side, and, in a breath, sealed his fate by saying, completely breathless, "Really."

A moment of complete silence. Then: "Fuck, Harry," Tom said, the breath knocked out of him, and everything defensive about his stance dropped. In the next second he was striding across the two steps separating them and grabbing a hold of Harry's face, eyes flicking between his eyes and mouth twice before making the jump for the both of them and pressing their lips together.

An electric shock would've startled him less, left his nerves more intact. He almost jumped back but Tom held him steady, and by that point his mind was too blank and his heart was racing far too fast to even think about taking a different course of action.

As such, Harry, suddenly frantic, reached up and grabbed onto Tom's hair, moaning when their lips parted and the kiss turned from an innocent press of lips to absolutely filthy.

They were rough with each other—so much pent up desire overflowing—grabbing onto each other roughly, teeth biting into lips, hair pulling—

Nothing was enough—it was all *so much*—

Tom's tongue against his almost had his eyes rolling back, the first sound that came from Tom—the most arousing moan Harry had ever heard—had him straining in his pants. Amidst all the fantasies and wet dreams and vivid daydreaming, nothing compared to the real thing, to having Tom's hands on him, his tongue, his stomach under Harry's hands, his hair, his cock pressed up against Harry's hip—hard, heavy, absolutely mouthwatering.

When Tom crowded him back until the back of his legs hit the nightstand, hard enough to knock half the things off it, and snuck a hand down to his arse and *grabbed*—Harry couldn't cope anymore, and he pushed him back until they broke apart and he could push Tom down onto his bed.

He went, blinking up at him, dazed and disoriented. His pupils were blown so wide, hair already a mess, and lips red and kiss-bitten. His flush was blotchy red, disappearing all down his shirt.

Harry only took a second to look, licking over his lips as he did so, trying to catch his breath in a futile effort, before he was crowding Tom down into the mattress, unbuttoning his shirt as he kissed him again.

It was heady, absolutely frantic and frenzied. They were *desperate* for each other, and the feeling was palpable between them, felt in every touch. Nothing was languorous or dragged out.

He ended up ripping the last of Tom's buttons, too eager to get the fucking shirt off. "I'll buy you a new one," he rasped mindlessly into his neck, biting and sucking the skin there as Tom panted beneath him, replying only with a moan.

Harry pulled him up and pushed the shirt off his shoulders, pressing open mouthed kisses into his throat, collarbones, cheeks, and mouth as he did so. He'd chucked his glasses off at some point, and resented the blur in his vision that meant he couldn't fully appreciate the sight of a dreadfully aroused Tom—though if the sounds he was making were anything to go by, it was absolutely delectable.

Maybe he was too eager, and wasn't taking his time, savouring it all properly, but as soon as the shirt was off, Harry's hands flew down to Tom's belt buckle and started undoing it.

Tom was panting—the only sounds in the room were that of their kisses and heavy breathing—but something changed as Harry's hand ghosted over his cock as he worked the belt buckle open, his breaths going from aroused to panicked in a second.

"Wait—wait—" he said frantically, reaching out to grab Harry's wrist. Their eyes locked, and Harry resented his shitty eyesight even more, incapable of deciphering what was going on beyond a vague sense of panic. "Harry—I don't know if—I can't—"

Harry surprised himself by saying, "No, no, no, shut up." He'd stopped all movement—just in case—and Tom was looking at him with wide eyes. He swallowed, trying to get his head in order a bit, slow down his desperate need to get his hands on as much of Tom as he could. He heaved a breath, and settled on saying, "If you don't want to have sex that's more than fine, just say the word and we'll stop, I'm more than happy with that."

Tom went to say something but Harry pinched his hip in reprimand, hating himself for what he was about to say, but ploughing on anyway lest he never actually get the words out.

“But either we’re giving this a try or not—no bullshit about our friendship being too important, if you can’t do this then everything between us is over,” he said, a shaky breath following the words as he hung his head, voice dropping in confidence as he went on with, “You broke my fucking heart Tom, and I’m not letting you do that again. Not unless it’s on my terms.”

When Tom was silent at his words, he huffed in frustration and reached out blindly for his glasses, needing to see him properly to know what was going on.

“For fuck’s sake,” he swore when he couldn’t find them, feeling unbelievably frustrated by both his fucking glasses and Tom’s silence. He couldn’t do it—he’d had so much hope—a lump was already forming in his throat and his heart dropped into his fucking stomach and tears were pricking at his eyes—

Tom reached down onto the floor and picked up his glasses for him, sitting up properly to slip them onto his nose for him. When Harry got a good look, he had a small tentative smile on his dishevelled features.

“I broke your heart?” he asked quietly, hand gingerly resting on Harry’s arm. He was kneeling between Tom’s legs, his hands having found his thighs almost instinctively.

He nodded, sitting back on his ankles, still struggling to catch his breath. “Of course you fucking did, Tom, come on. You know that.”

“How could you let me do that?” he asked in a whisper, reaching up to brush a finger along Harry’s jaw, humming to prompt him into answering when he remained silent, distracted by Tom’s careful touch.

Harry hummed, feeling a bit confused but subdued by Tom’s demeanour, tilting his head to catch his finger against his lips, pressing a kiss to it. “You just did, what could I do about it?” he asked quietly, their heavy words contrasting with their soft touches. “I meant it though, you need to make up your mind—I can’t stay friends, I love you too much.” The words held weight over them, and Harry closed his eyes to avoid the fallout.

“I’m sorry,” Tom whispered, shuffling closer, making the bed sheets rustle in the quiet. “I’m sorry I hurt you—I never meant to. I do want to give it a try—I thought, maybe a bit stupidly, that I’d get over you. I tried to convince myself I just fancied you a bit, you know? It’s just all so—unexpected, and scary. Everything about you is unexpected and—”

Harry took a shuddering breath, exhaling shakily as Tom’s lips found his jaw, pressing an open mouthed kiss there. “Are you serious?” he asked, needing the confirmation that this was real and happening.

Tom nodded against him, nose catching against his cheek. “Yeah—yeah. I can’t let you go, Harry, you mean too much to me.”

Harry's breath hitched and he jerked his head to the side, nosing at Tom's cheek. He mouthed a path down to his mouth, kissing him much slower than he previously had, his mind a bit less hazy with the shock of it all.

"What—" he murmured against his lips, distracting himself with another kiss as he reached up to hold Tom's cheek in his hand, tilting his head back to kiss him deeper— "you my boyfriend now?"

Tom hummed, struggling to keep up with Harry's kisses and chatter if the way he gripped his arm was anything to go by. "Yeah," he said breathlessly, reaching up to thread his fingers through his hair, tugging gently, pupils blown wide, "you're mine."

Harry's lips parted around an exhale, arousal spiking low in his stomach. "Been yours for ages, idiot."

Tom smiled, kissing him again before pulling back abruptly a few seconds later. "And I do want to have sex with you," he said seriously, "I really do." Harry smiled, endeared, though he was also dreadfully turned on, gripping Tom's thigh as a response. "It's just—" his confidence wavered visibly, eyes darting down— "it's a lot." He swallowed, a shudder making his shoulders shake.

Harry licked over his lips, leaning down to press a small kiss into the crook of his neck. "Lay down," he whispered, pressing a thumb into his hip to encourage him.

Tom looked at him apprehensively before doing as told, laying back on his elbows. He was still shirtless, and with his glasses back on, Harry really got to check him out properly.

He set his hands on Tom's thighs, rubbing up and down gently. He looked at him, admiring the way his Adam's Apple bobbed when he swallowed. "Intimacy can be scary," he said softly, continuing his consistent rub, inching up slowly. "We can stop whenever you want, we can slow down whenever you want. The most important thing is that you're not uncomfortable, okay?"

He nodded, tongue darting out to lick his lips as his legs spread a bit further.

Harry ignored how heat flared up his spine, focusing more intently on Tom. "It can be overwhelming," he said, even but quiet, "unwelcome, even. But this is me, I've touched you a thousand times, it's hardly any different."

"It feels quite different," Tom said breathlessly, chest heaving. His flush had come back in full force, and Harry's thigh trick was working a treat, his hips shifting upwards almost imperceptibly, seeking contact instead of evading it.

"The main difference is this'll make you cum," Harry said, biting his lip as Tom's lashes fluttered shut at his words. "Can I take your trousers off?" His hands had reached his hips and were thumbing at his belt buckle, rubbing small circles into his skin. He felt the way Tom repressed the urge to flex his hips up, seeking friction that Harry wasn't giving him.

He nodded quickly, huffing out a breath. “Yes,” he said, biting back a groan as Harry traced the outline of his cock with his thumb.

Harry bit his lip through a smile, his hands going to Tom’s belt that was already partway undone. The sound of the metal clanging mingling with their heavy breaths was somehow one of the most erotic things Harry had ever heard. “You can tell me to slow down too, if it’s too much but you don’t want to stop,” he whispered, eyes trained on his own hands as he popped the button on Tom’s trousers, pulling the zip down slowly.

“Fuck,” Tom groaned when Harry’s fingers slipped under his waistband. He lifted his hips up to let him take the trousers off, leaving him in his boxers.

“Did you hear what I said?” Harry asked, hands settling on Tom’s now bare thighs, swallowing at the way the muscles jumped under his touch. He held on tight, bending down to press kisses into his stomach.

“Fuck—*yes*,” he bit back a groan, panting, “yes I did.”

Harry smiled against his skin, hands inching up to his boxers until he had two fingers dipping into his waistband, heart kicking up as he did so—he felt like he might shake apart with the anticipation, with the *want*.

“We’re the only ones here,” he said, straightening back up, pausing the movement of his fingers, thumbs resting on his cock through the fabric, “so you can be as loud as you want.”

“Oh, piss off—*fuck*—” He cut himself off with a moan he couldn’t quite bite back as Harry pressed his palm against his cock.

“Boxers?” Harry asked, an urgent quality to his voice.

Tom didn’t seem to mind, nodding almost frantically, eager to push his hips up to help him out.

With the boxers pushed to his mid-thigh, Harry swallowed, pushing his glasses back onto his nose properly, just to make sure he was seeing properly—with a sort of hysterical feeling he wondered what in the world he’d done to deserve lucking out like this.

Tom was incontestably the most attractive person Harry had ever seen in his life, and frankly, his fantasies held nothing to the real thing.

His cock was hard, twitchy, leaking at the tip. Pale, like the rest of him, save for the tip that was bubblegum pink. Curved, thick—fuck, Harry was going to *die*.

“Harry come *on,*” Tom urged, a desperate quality to his voice that snapped him right out of his ogling in favour of a much more pressing desire to get his hands on him.

“Hold on a second,” Harry said, breathless, as he leant over Tom, pressing a kiss to his cheek as he did so, reaching down under his bed by the headboard for the lube he stashed there—just in case.

“Wait—wait—” Tom said as he saw what Harry had uncovered, grabbing onto his wrist— “do you mind if I—”

“What?” Harry said, pausing as he hovered above him, giving in to the temptation to press a quick kiss to his jaw. “Tell me what you want.”

Tom took a breath, tilting his head back as Harry’s kisses trailed down into his neck. “Do you mind if I fuck you?” he asked quietly, swallowing under Harry’s mouth. “And not the other way around?”

“Oh,” Harry said, chuckling lightly into his throat, nipping the skin there, “‘course, if that’s what you’d prefer.”

“Yeah,” Tom said, breathy, “that’s—just for now.”

Harry smiled, moving his kisses up his neck, searching for his mouth. “I mean—” he murmured against his lips, cutting himself off with kisses— “you can do, of course—” more kisses, a hint of tongue along his bottom lip— “that is, if you can get it up again after the handjob I’m about to give you.”

Tom moaned as Harry pried his lips apart with his tongue, leaving him breathless once he’d pulled back, looking at him with a crooked grin as he waited for his words to compute. When they did, Tom bit his lip, flush worsening.

“I’m nineteen, Harry,” he said, a small smile playing on his lips, “not sixty five—don’t worry about it.”

“Brilliant,” Harry whispered, leaning back in to kiss him deeply, intent on making Tom lose his fucking mind.

He sat back on his knees as he broke away, Tom looking adequately dazed. He tried to follow mindlessly, leaning back up on his elbows, but just stopped to look, chest heaving, as Harry made to squirt some lube onto his palm.

He stopped—he was straining in his pants, and he felt hot all over. “Hold on just a second,” he said quickly, getting up from the bed. He unbuttoned his shirt in record time, yanking it off his shoulder before ridding himself of his trousers in the same rough manner. He breathed a sigh of relief, sneaking a hand into his boxers to give his cock a quick squeeze. “That’s better,” he said, settling back onto his knees between Tom’s spread legs, running his hands up from his ankles to his thighs.

“You’re gorgeous,” Tom said, sounding breathless, looking up at him with hooded lids, pupils blown wide, lips swollen and parted.

Harry’s stomach squirmed, biting his lip as he squirted lube onto his palm. “Says you,” he said, winking at him before running his hand up his cock, wetting the tip.

It would be forever ingrained in his memory the way Tom’s head fell back, baring his throat as he moaned, hips stuttering up into Harry’s hand.

“Shit,” he hissed, panting as he looked back at Harry with wide eyes, “oh *fuck*, Harry—”

Harry watched, chest heaving. He catalogued every moan and twitch, learning exactly what Tom liked—he kept it slow though, a pace just a tad faster than teasing. “Feels good?” he asked, voice rough and scratchy. His mouth was dry, so entranced with every one of Tom’s reactions.

“*God*—of course it feels fucking good,” he replied, completely breathless, the undercurrent of a moan in every one of his words, “you’ve got your hand around my cock, you idiot.”

Harry grinned, breath stuttering as he picked up the pace and Tom’s eyes rolled back, his jaw clenching through a groan as his hips flexed up.

He leant over him, never letting up on the cadence, breath mingling as their lips barely touched, Tom’s moans filling the space between them until Harry closed the distance to swallow them up greedily.

Tom’s moans took on a whiny quality after a time, and he panted into Harry’s mouth, thrusting up into his hand desperately.

“That’s it,” Harry whispered, completely mindless with the pleasure of watching Tom fall apart.

“Harry—” he gasped, squeezing his eyes shut. “*Shit*—Harry—”

Harry hummed, sucking the skin beneath his ear, the wet sounds of his hand moving over Tom’s cock filling the spaces between their heavy breaths.

“*Ah*—God, Harry—”

His cock twitched in his hand, and Harry leant back to watch properly, squeezing at the tip and twisting down at the base.

Tom’s lips parted as his breath stuttered, his shoulders curling into himself, collarbones carving out. “*Harry*—” he whined, followed by the most erotic moan in the world as he came across his stomach in thick ropes. Throat bared, eyes rolling back, lips parted—Harry moaned, cock twitching in his pants as he stroked Tom through his orgasm.

He groaned after a few moments, collapsing back onto the bed with an arm across his face, chest heaving. He hissed, trying to pull his hips away from Harry’s hand, overstimulation hitting him.

Harry let go gently, swallowing as he took a moment for himself too—mind numb with the overwhelming arousal. “You okay?” he asked after their breathing evened out a bit, rubbing a hand along his hip, thumbing at his happy trail that had been spared by the cum landing next to it.

Tom hummed, shuffling, the sheets rustling with the movement. He reached an arm out blindly and caught Harry’s wrist, tugging him down until they were nose to nose. Tom kissed him, a bit dazed, a bit absentminded.

Harry smiled into it, wiping his hand on the sheet to get rid of the lube there, and brushed Tom's hair back from his forehead, basking in the soft moment.

Tom sighed, wrapping an arm around his waist.

"You're gonna get cum on me if you pull me any closer," Harry mumbled with a laugh, holding himself up with an arm.

"Don't care," he grumbled, smiling against his lips, pulling down insistently until Harry gave in and collapsed on top of him. "Give me a second," he said, both hands roaming along Harry's sides, "and then I'll look after you."

"Oh?" Harry said, teasing as he nipped at his bottom lip, suckling gently. "How will you do that?"

"Hmm." He reached up and held onto Harry's jaw tenderly, tilting his head to kiss him properly.

Small kisses at first quickly grew deep and heated, Tom grabbing at Harry's thighs to pull him up into his lap as he sat up, until Harry was panting into the kiss, pressing closer still to rub his aching cock against Tom's stomach.

Tom groaned, leaning back and letting Harry go as he struggled to pull his boxers back up before kissing him again, hand on his arse, lifting him effortlessly and laying him back at the other end of the bed.

Harry laughed, holding onto his shoulders in his disorientation. Tom shut him up with another kiss, pressing him into the mattress with a hand on his hip and another in his hair. They did just that for a while, a sort of playful but desperate scuffle, every kiss sending Harry further into that state of mindless pleasure that had moans tumbling from his lips, Tom's name on the tip of his tongue with every exhale.

Tom moved down to his neck, hand on his thigh and mouth sucking at his throat. Harry's hands were in his hair, legs wrapping around his waist needily, arching up into him.

"Tom," he said, gasping the name, "come on." Tom just continued mouthing torturously at his throat, hands tight where they were gripping him. "Come on," Harry urged, a whine somewhere at the back of his throat, "I need—"

"What do you need?" Tom asked in a whisper, voice raspy and fucked out.

Harry groaned, pressing his head back into the mattress as his hips seeked friction with the body above him. "I need you to touch me," he said, pulling Tom's hair.

"I am touching you."

Harry huffed in frustration, the needy whine breaking free. "I need you to fuck me," he said on a breath, suddenly desperate with it—his heart was slamming against his ribcage with the desperate *need* for it.

Tom stilled, audibly swallowing before he groaned, hands tightening almost painfully where he was gripping onto Harry. “Yeah?” he said, coming up from his throat to look for confirmation.

Harry nodded fervently, a glaze in his eyes despite his glasses still on his nose that was making everything seem a bit blurry around the edges.

Tom shuffled back, plucking the glasses from Harry’s face and setting them on the floor. “Okay,” he murmured, bending down to press a kiss to his sternum as his fingers hooked under the waistband of his underwear.

Shamelessly, Harry lifted his hips and breathed a sigh of relief as Tom tugged the boxers off, his cock finally bobbing free. He was achingly hard, harder than he’d ever been in his life.

“Fuckin’ hell, Harry,” Tom murmured, a shakiness to his voice. “You’re so gorgeous.”

Feeling heat creeping up his chest, flushing his cheeks with it, Harry put an arm over his face, toes digging into the sheets. He repressed the urge to squirm, trying to tame the flex of his hips, constantly searching for friction. “Tom—” he whined, teeth grinding as the coil of tension in him threatened to snap.

“Yes, yeah,” Tom said, hands fluttering over Harry’s thighs. “You’ve never done this, have you?” he asked softly after a second passed.

“No,” Harry said, trying to catch his breath.

“Me neither.”

“I know, just take it slow, okay?” Harry said, peeking up from under his arm to see Tom looking at him intently. “Just not too slow, mind, I’m gonna die if I don’t cum soon.”

Tom huffed a small laugh, pinching his hip as the tension seemed to bleed from his shoulder. “Let me know if I hurt you, okay?” he said, achingly gentle, as he bent down to press a kiss to Harry’s mouth, the touch calming him down a bit.

“I will do,” Harry assured, kissing him back.

Frankly that was one of the last things Harry could remember clearly, as soon as Tom started touching him—fingers skirting the length of his cock, hand wrapping around it experimentally, the sound of him dousing his fingers in lube, those same fingers pushing into him one by one—it all fell into the blur of mindless pleasure.

There were some clumsy moments—Tom spilling lube all over the bedsheets for instance—but they just laughed through them before Tom would inevitably move his fingers again and Harry would be gripping the sheets, panting for more.

By the time Tom had three fingers inside him, pressing insistently against his prostate while his other hand stroked his cock slowly, Harry was a mess, eyes unfocused and moans tumbling from his lips as he rocked back into Tom’s ministrations, desperate for release.

“Tom come on, Jesus, I’m *ready*,” he whined, voice pitching up as Tom crooked his fingers at the same time.

Tom was panting between his legs, looking about just as affected as Harry was. “Wanna make sure,” he mumbled—the same reply Harry had gotten the last three times he’d asked.

“For fuck’s—*ah*—sake, Tom I’m ready!”

“Just—”

“God—fuck,” Harry groaned, putting a stop to Tom’s movements with a Herculean effort as he sat up, grabbing his wrist to stop him.

Tom stared at him, eyes wide, and when he had the audacity to move his fingers again, drawing out a surprised groan from him, Harry understood that he was being *teased*. With a huff of laughter he shook his head, biting his lip, before pushing Tom back, until his fingers slipped out of him and he fell back against the pillows.

“Just do it myself, shall I?” he said, crawling up Tom’s body—yanking his boxers off him in the process—and straddling his lap.

“Oh shit—Harry,” Tom said, hands gripping his waist as he looked up at him with wide apprehensive eyes.

“God,” Harry said with a laugh as he coated Tom’s cock in lube and lined up, “you used so much lube.” His thighs were sticky with it.

Tom’s breath stuttered, and his eyes kept darting between Harry’s and his cock. “Yeah,” he said breathlessly, “didn’t want to hurt you.”

Harry hummed, getting distracted as the head of Tom’s cock pressed into him, making him hiss with the stretch.

“Fuck fuck fuck,” Tom chanted, holding on even tighter and he threw his head back against the pillows.

Harry watched him, arousal taking over again as he sank down a couple more inches and Tom’s lips parted, something like wonder on his face as he blinked dazedly. Tom really had prepared him very thoroughly, because aside from the initial stretch, it didn’t hurt much at all—the pain didn’t match the overwhelming arousal, anyway.

When he’d taken it all, Harry sat, catching his breath—he’d never felt so full, and the hum in his mind shutting out anything that wasn’t Tom intensified. It was like the gravitational pull in the world shifted, drawing him to Tom and nothing else—nothing else mattered, nothing else *existed*. It was heady and all-consuming, and Harry felt drunk off of it, bones rattling with the intense pleasure of it.

Tom made a noise, hands leaving their perch on Harry’s hips to climb upwards, wrapping around his back as he pulled himself up until he was sitting up, only a couple inches lower than Harry. He searched, blindly, for Harry’s mouth with his own, eyes unfocused and dazed.

The position did nothing for their end goal of getting off, but it was like that was forgotten. Harry rocked against him gently, but the most important thing at that moment wasn't the connection of their bodies but that of their souls.

They held onto each other, lips catching from time to time as their breaths mingled. The moment seemed to be frozen in time, and Harry felt the overwhelming need to pour out the words on the tip of his tongue.

"I love you," he mumbled in between kisses, hands raking along Tom's neck and up into his hair, holding him close.

Tom's breath hitched, his hips shifting, making them both moan. "Harry—" He said it in the way you'd typically say *God* and it lit Harry's nerves on fire. He groaned, kissing him deeper. "I love you too," he murmured.

Harry's heart stuttered, and he lifted up a bit, arching into Tom's hands at his back, his mouth on his collarbone, and sank back down, knocking the breath out of the both of them.

Tom dragged him back down, grappling at his back, wrapping him up until their chests pressed together. "Say it again," he whispered, looking up from beneath his lashes, pupils blown wide.

"I love you," Harry said easily, earnestly.

Tom looked up at him, a vulnerability in his eyes that would better be directed at a Saint you worship and pray to. "God you're—*everything*," he said nonsensically, before tightening his hold around Harry's waist and flipping them over so that he landed on his back.

He wasted no time in wrapping his legs around Tom's waist, dragging him in closer, heat pooling in his stomach with every shift.

Tom leant over him, burying his face in his neck and mouthing at the skin there as he started moving his hips, pressing into Harry before dragging right back out.

"Fuck," Harry choked out, losing his breath as stars danced behind his eyes for the mind-numbing *pleasure*.

"*Fuck*, Harry—" Tom moaned right in his ear, grabbing his thigh with one hand, and pinning his wrists above his head with the other.

"*Shit*—" Struggling to catch his breath, Harry arched into Tom's thrusts, a litany of moans, '*fuck*'s and '*Tom*'s tumbling from his mouth.

Mixing with their moans were the sounds of the bed creaking and the headboard hitting the wall with every one of Tom's increasingly brutal thrusts.

Harry was *loud*—he'd never been so loud in his life, had never imagined he could be—but there was no way he could tone it down, everything felt so overwhelmingly good.

Tom let go of his wrists, his hand joining the other in gripping Harry's hips with bruising tightness, and Harry's hands went to his hair, pulling and tugging.

In the midst of their frantic fucking—Harry's nails scraping over Tom's back as they moaned into each other's ears, mouthing and biting at any skin they could get to—there was a sound, potentially the front door opening, but it escaped Harry's mind as soon as it had entered, lost in the creaking and banging of the bed against the wall, and drowned out a moment later by a particularly loud moan of Tom's name.

It was completely desperate but so *passionate*, and Harry's mind went blank, only realising it was when he jerked back into awareness when Tom wrapped a hand around his cock trapped between them.

It only took three strokes and Harry's eyes were rolling back, Tom's name fading into a senseless moan as he came across their chests—only then did Tom's pace stutter and Harry felt the most strangely erotic sensation of having Tom cum inside him, a moaned, "*Harry*," in his ear, fingers digging into his waist, and teeth on his neck.

They were utterly breathless afterwards, Tom slumping onto him as they caught their breaths. Harry's fingers were in his hair, petting softly, brushing it back.

Tom groaned as he moved back, his cock slipping out, and Harry hissed at the emptiness, frowning at how weird it felt. "Sorry," Tom whispered, pressing an apologetic kiss into his cheek before he sneaked his arms between Harry and the mattress, falling onto his chest with a contented sigh.

Harry smiled, humming, happy to bask in the afterglow for a while.

In the silence that followed, voices filtered up from downstairs, and Harry realised that the others had come back, probably whilst they were having the loudest sex the school had most likely ever witnessed.

He huffed out a laugh, not even bothering to feel embarrassed.

"What?"

"The others are back," Harry murmured, kissing Tom's forehead lovingly.

Tom hummed, disinterested. "D'you want to have a shower?"

"Considering I've got your cum dripping out of me, yeah, I do," he replied, amused. His voice was completely fucked, hoarse and rough.

Tom pushed himself up, a lazy grin on his face as he eyed him, the silver chain hanging around his neck hitting Harry's chin. "Hot," he said, grin turning sly.

Harry laughed, leaning up to kiss him—absolutely marvelling at being able to do so.

Tom reciprocated gladly, sighing happily as he pressed playful kisses to Harry's lips. "Why was I so averse to this?" he wondered aloud between kisses. "It's wonderful."

Harry laughed, shaking his head at him. “You’re just high off of the endorphins, come tomorrow you’ll realise you hate me.”

“I could never,” he said, soft but serious. “I promise. I’ll love you tomorrow more than I ever could today.”

It stole Harry’s breath away, and his heart beat a quick, *thump thump thump*, against his chest. “You’ll kill me if you make a habit of saying things like that,” he whispered, tucking a curl behind Tom’s ear tenderly.

Tom smiled, bumping his nose against Harry’s. “Though come tomorrow I might remember why I was so averse, we *do* have another performance left and I’m honestly not sure I’ll be able to keep my hands off you.”

Harry laughed lightly, kissing his cheek—unsure of how he’d manage himself during the play. “We’ll do what we’ve been doing for months—act, pretend like we don’t want to fuck each other stupid.”

Tom laughed. “It might help that our characters want to fuck each other too.”

Harry hummed, playing with Tom’s fingers absentmindedly. “If you think about it, we're just really good method actors.”

Laughing again, a happy smile on his face, Tom pressed a kiss to his jaw. “Idiot,” he said affectionately, moving to get up. “Come on, let’s have that shower.”

Harry hummed, watching Tom grab their towels from the hooks at the back of the door. He wrapped his own around his waist, and held Harry’s up beside the bed with a cocked eyebrow.

He got up from his bed, legs much shakier than he’d anticipated them being, and laughed when Tom wrapped the towel around his waist for him. “Eager to get me covered up are you?”

Tom glanced at him, pinching his waist. “For the walk to the bathroom, yes, wouldn’t want someone else to see you.”

Harry laughed. “Fair enough. We’re gonna have to hurry up, you know that, don’t you? As soon as Theo hears this door opening he’s gonna be running up here.”

Tom rolled his eyes. “Of course I know that, Harry. You go first and just ignore them all if they speak to us.”

Harry grinned, nodding as he went to the door. He paused, listening to the voices from down below. It sounded like they were all back, most likely the party had come to an end, it was already past midnight. “Okay, ready?” he whispered, looking back at Tom who nodded, standing close behind.

Harry got a hand on his towel and opened the door quickly, trusting Tom to shut it behind them, before walking briskly the length of the hallway.

Oddly enough, it was absolutely silent as they made their way to the bathroom, not a peep from downstairs.

“What was that about?” Harry asked, turning to Tom in the cramped space once the door was closed and locked behind them.

Tom was biting back an exasperated sort of smile, leaning into the shower to turn the water on before answering, “I peaked over the bannister, Gaspar had a hand on Theo’s mouth shutting him up, and Rick gave me a thumbs up.”

Harry snorted, shaking his head as he glanced at the mirror beside him. Despite the blur in his vision he could see how messy his hair was, how red his lips were, and all the red-purple spots on his neck.

Tom came up behind him, pressing himself to his back. He leant down, peppering kisses onto his neck as his hands moved down to loosen the towel until it fell to the floor. “Sorry about the hickeys,” he murmured, one hand splayed on Harry’s lower stomach and the other touching the marks on his neck. “But you did start it.”

Harry squinted at the quickly fogging up mirror, and saw the vague purple blotches on Tom’s neck, one going so far up as his jaw. “Jesus,” he mumbled, leaning back into Tom’s chest. “Sorry.”

He laughed, the sound rumbling against Harry’s back. “It’s fine,” he said, pressing kisses into his neck.

Biting back a sound, Harry grabbed onto the sink. “Shower,” he said pointedly. “There’s no way you can go again.” He turned around to face Tom, untying his towel in turn, biting his bottom lip as it dropped to the floor.

“In theory I could,” Tom said, tilting Harry’s chin back. “But I owe you an orgasm, I think.”

Harry laughed, inching around him to get into the shower, sighing as the hot water hit him. “It’s not a competition,” he said when Tom joined him, “but I am winning.”

Tom wet his hair, pushing it back as he leant out of the spray of the water. “Don’t think I can’t catch up.”

“Oh yeah?” Harry said, amused though his cock was definitely stirring in interest. “You know, I’m dying to suck you off, so I’ll be two ahead by then.”

“Is that right?” Tom asked, crowding him back against the wall of the shower stall.

Harry hissed as his back hit the cold surface, head tilting back to look up at Tom’s heated gaze. He hummed, reaching out to wrap his arms around his shoulders. “Yeah,” he said, breathing heavily as he tugged him down for a kiss.

Tom moaned into it, hands rough where they held onto him, pressing him further into the wall.

"*Ah*—you're so fucking fit," Harry mumbled, his cock already well on it's way to being hard between them.

Tom chuckled against him, mouthing at his jaw. "You think so?" he leered into his ear, licking the shell of it.

Harry was already clinging to him for dear life, panting as the room fogged up because of the hot water still beating down on them. He nodded, looking at Tom through half lidded eyes. "I know so."

Tom grinned, kissing him again and swallowing up the moan Harry let out—loud and unexpected—as he wrapped a hand around his cock.

So caught up with Tom's hand on his cock he didn't register his fingers sneaking between his legs until he murmured, "Good thing I used so much lube, right?"

And Harry could barely form a single thought, could only watch as Tom sank to his knees right there in the shower, coaxed one of Harry's legs over his shoulder, and continued stroking his cock whilst pushing two fingers into him.

"*Shit*, Tom," Harry said, words slurring together in his mindless pleasure—his vision whited out every time Tom's fingers rubbed insistently against his prostate, and all the blood that was supposed to be in his brain was in his cock— "I dunno if I can be trusted not to fall right now."

"I've got you," Tom murmured, pressing open mouthed kisses into his thigh as he let go of his cock, hand going to hold his hips steady instead.

Harry whined at the loss of contact anyway, despite knowing it was for his own good—what with the way the leg holding him up was shaking already, his fingers a bit numb in Tom's hair.

Tom's fingers never stopped their insistent press inside of him, and his mouth slowly made its way up his thigh, up to his hip bone, until he was tentatively licking up the length of his cock, sucking the tip into his mouth.

Harry's answering moan was *obscene*, and his eyes actually rolled back, head hitting the wall behind him. Tom hummed around him, and Harry's breaths turned shallow. The sound of the water hitting the shower tray was deafening, a sort of white noise that meant Harry could do nothing but remain entirely focused on Tom's ministrations.

The pace Tom held was slow but it was absolutely mind-blowing, and Harry found himself rocking against it—against the fingers curling inside him, and against Tom's mouth, rolling his hips to inch his cock further into the wet heat.

It was the sort of pleasure that bloomed throughout his entire body, unlike anything he'd ever felt before, overwhelming in the way it made his toes and fingertips numb, how it rattled his bones and lit his bloodstream on fire.

“Tom—” he gasped out, garbled and almost incoherent— “I’m gonna cum.”

Eyes rolling back, moaning through his clenched teeth, something almost akin to a sob flowing up his chest and past his lips, he came on Tom’s tongue.

Thankfully Tom was pro-active, and pulled off quickly to catch Harry around the waist to break his fall as his leg gave out, the other one slipping off his shoulder.

“I’ve got you,” Tom murmured, sounding far too pleased with himself, smug.

Harry couldn’t even get a word out, shaking so violently his teeth chattered and he started shivering. Black spots were dancing in his vision, and he felt so disoriented all he could do was let his head loll onto Tom’s shoulder as he shut his eyes—just for a minute.

He came to, most likely seconds later, with Tom pulling his hair back. “Harry, you back with me? Come on, darlin’.”

Harry hummed, blinking sluggishly—it was a very surreal thing, being so absolutely out of it.

Tom smiled, letting go of his hair in favour of stroking his cheek. “D’you pass out for a second there?”

“Don’t—” Harry said, slurring the word, blinking to try and shake the way his eyes kept wanting to cross— “Don’t look so smug about it,” he managed to say.

Tom laughed, pulling him close again and planting a kiss on his cheek. “I think I’ve earned being smug, don’t you think?”

“Bastard,” Harry mumbled, clinging onto him. He was so exhausted he could barely move.

Tom chuckled into his neck, stroking his side tenderly. “Hold on, around my shoulders, I’ll clean you up quickly then we can go to bed, okay?”

Harry complied, holding on as Tom got up, helping him up as he went. He sighed as Tom lathered soap all over him, washing him carefully. He cleaned the makeup off Harry’s face too, rubbing around his eyes gently. His legs were like jelly and most—if not all—of his weight was supported by his arms around Tom’s shoulders.

He sighed happily again as Tom dismounted the shower head to rinse him off. “This is exactly what I wanted to happen when we showered together last time,” he mumbled, having regained some of his wits.

“Oh yeah?” Tom said, sounding amused. “That’s the night I realised I really fancied you, you know? Not during the shower, I already knew by then—it was during *Hamlet*, remember when I forgot my line and you gave it to me? I hadn’t actually forgotten my line, I was just in the middle of realising that I really fancied you.”

“What?” Harry said, taken aback by the easy confession, pulling back to look at him. “Are you serious?”

Tom hummed, setting the shower head back up. “Yeah. Out you get then, you’re all done. Though you might want to have a proper shower tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, yeah,” Harry said, letting Tom herd him out of the shower where he was wrapped up in a towel and seated on the closed toilet lid.

“Get dry, I’ll just wash quickly,” Tom said, getting back under the water.

Harry didn’t use the time to get dry, preferring to watch Tom under the shower, through the fog and the perpetual blur in his eyesight. He could still make out the picture; the muscles in his back flexing as he reached up to rinse his hair, the way the water cascaded against his stomach, down the V framing his hips. It was just as erotic as those men’s shampoo adverts that made Harry’s heart beat faster as a pre-teen—even more so because it was Tom.

He shut the water off when he was finished and stepped out of the shower, grabbing his towel and wiping his face before wrapping it around his waist. “Feeling a bit better?” he asked, turning to Harry and passing a hand through his hair gently.

Harry hummed, leaning into the touch.

“Good,” Tom said softly. “We’ll brush our teeth and then go to bed, yeah?”

“Yeah, okay,” Harry agreed, standing up on shaky legs.

“Do you need me to hold you up?”

Harry narrowed his eyes in his direction, hearing the smug amusement in his voice. “I’m perfectly fine, thank you.”

Tom laughed, putting toothpaste on their toothbrushes. “We just don’t want you to faint again.”

“You’re going to be so annoying about this, aren't you?” Harry said, accepting his toothbrush and turning to the mirror. “You know, I’ve had a long day, a very emotionally taxing day, actually—and then you hit me with two earth shattering orgasms, I’m sorry if that was a bit overwhelming.”

Tom chuckled as he brushed his teeth, knocking into Harry’s hip playfully. “I never said it was a problem,” he said through the toothpaste in his mouth. “If anything, I’m flattered.”

Harry hummed, brushing his teeth. “I bet you are,” he mumbled.

They finished cleaning their teeth side by side, knocking into each other and pulling faces in the mirror as they always had done whenever they brushed their teeth together. Harry couldn’t help but notice how well they went together, their picture reflected in the mirror in front of him. Everything was perfect, even their matching hickeys all up one side of their necks.

“Okay, ready to sneak out?” Tom asked once they’d finished.

“Yep.”

“Good, don’t collapse.”

“Oh piss off,” Harry hissed, rushing after him as he took off down the hallway.

Again, they got to their room without issue from the boys gathered downstairs, and Harry couldn’t help but feel grateful for them respecting their privacy when it really mattered.

“God it stinks of sex in here,” Harry said, staring at his bed with wide eyes. The sheets were in complete disarray, mattress half uncovered and a visible wet spot on the cover where the lube had spilled.

“Sleep in my bed, yeah?”

“Well I’m not gonna sleep in there,” Harry said with a scoff, gesturing to his bed.

Tom laughed, shamelessly removing his towel as he dried his back. “Do you want to smoke a joint before we go to sleep? I have what we need.”

“Yeah I’d love to,” Harry said, dragging his eyes away from checking Tom out. He went over to the nightstand and set it right, picking up everything that had fallen, and turned the lamp on before crossing the room and turning the overhead light off. “Oh, you’re getting dressed?” he asked, a pathetically disappointed tinge to his voice that made him sound distraught about the prospect, which, to be fair, he was.

Tom laughed, looking over at him as he pulled some boxers on. “Just underwear,” he said, “I don’t trust everyone to leave us alone indefinitely.”

Harry hummed. “Yeah, you might be right.”

“But feel free to not get dressed,” Tom added quickly.

Harry laughed, taking his towel off and hitting him with it gently before going to his wardrobe. He hissed as he stretched to dry his back, an ache blooming in his arse and lower back.

“You okay?” Tom asked, crawling into his bed with a small box of stuff to roll.

“Just a bit sore,” Harry said, stepping into his boxers.

“Hm,” Tom hummed, licking over his lips not so subtly.

“Find that hot too, don’t you?” Harry teased, opening the window before climbing into the bed alongside him.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Tom said shamelessly, leaning over to press a sweet lingering kiss to his lips before going back to rolling.

Harry smiled, feeling a bit giddy with the way Tom had so casually and seamlessly shifted into this affectionate and playful role of his—his *boyfriend*, he thought, cheeks heating up as the giddy feeling intensified.

“Do we have anything for an ashtray?” Tom asked as he was sealing the rolling paper together.

“Er—” looking around, Harry reached over and picked up a mug that had been sitting by his bed for a couple days and poured some water in it from a bottle they shared— “will this do?”

“Perfect,” Tom said, lighting the end of the joint, casting his face in a sort of ethereal orange glow that softened his features further. His hair was still mussed from the sex, and his face was slack with a peaceful sort of look.

He set a hand on Harry’s thigh under the cover, shuffling closer to him. Harry smiled, leaning into him once they were pressed together, the smoke permeating the room.

“Here,” Tom said, leaning over the side of the bed and coming back up with his glasses.

“Thank you,” Harry murmured, slipping them onto his nose and blinking at the newly focused world. “You look even better now,” he added with a grin.

Tom smiled, his cheeks flushing the prettiest pink. “Shut up,” he murmured, leaning in to kiss his cheek.

Harry plucked the joint from his fingers and took it for himself, returning the kiss with one of his own pressed to Tom’s mouth. “I don’t think I will,” he whispered.

Tom rolled his eyes, wrapping an arm around his shoulders, holding him close.

Harry smoked the joint silently for a while, watching the room fill with smoke as he basked in the warmth of skin on skin contact with Tom. An owl hooted in the distance again, and the sound of Harry exhaling filled the room, the orange tinge of the light in the room fogging over.

“Tom,” he said, turning to him to get his attention as he handed the joint back.

“What is it?”

“If you already knew you fancied me in December, why did you never do anything about it?” Harry asked quietly, looking up at him. His nimble fingers holding onto the joint, the way he held the smoke for a moment before exhaling.

“Because after that night,” Tom said, tapping the ash off into their makeshift ashtray, his voice low and quiet, “we became friends. I had a lot of fun with you, and I liked the direction our friendship was taking. I kept thinking I might try something, but as the days wore on I lost my nerve because every day we became better friends until I was so caught up in the friend thing that I couldn’t imagine ruining our friendship by trying for more.”

“But surely you knew I fancied you too,” Harry said, a bit disbelieving, “everyone did, I didn’t really hide it that well.”

“I didn’t actually, though I wondered,” Tom said pensively, the end of the joint glowing red as he pulled on it. “By the time I had my heavy suspicions I was too reluctant to put an end to our friendship for something more, something I wasn’t sure I wanted.” He shifted, sheets rustling around them as he cleared his throat of the lingering smoke, passing the joint back to Harry. “But tell me, when did you figure it out?”

Harry laughed lightly, leaning against his shoulder. “I wanted to fuck you as soon as I met you, to be honest—” Tom laughed, turning to him with disbelieving eyes— “and then on Halloween I was really really attracted to you—”

“Hm, Halloween did something for me too, to be honest,” Tom said pensively, pressing a kiss into his hair. “You were very…attractive.”

“Thanks,” Harry said with a small laugh. “Anyway, I realised I fancied you when we were rehearsing *Hamlet* on our own at one point, then I knew my feelings were spiralling out of control over Christmas, and then I realised I was in love with you that night we wrote the last scene of the play in January.” He spoke quietly, an air of reminiscence to it.

“What?” Tom said softly, all amusement gone, his face wiped blank with disbelieving wonder. “Are you serious? That long?”

Harry hummed, nodding. “Why? When did you realise?”

“Earlier today, actually,” Tom stated.

“You’re fucking kidding me.”

“No, though I will admit that I was in denial for a very long time,” Tom admitted guiltily. “I didn’t recognise it for what it was. I’ve never been in love before.”

“Me neither,” Harry murmured, heart thudding a steady rhythm against his ribcage, on par with his sluggish thoughts. “It just felt so big that it couldn’t be anything else.”

Tom smiled at him. “It felt so big to me that I couldn’t allow it to be anything.”

Harry looked up at him through glassy eyes, his blinks slow. He abandoned the joint in the ashtray for a moment as he reached up and held onto Tom’s cheek, pulling him down for a kiss. It was everything they’d lacked in the beginning; slow, tender, languorous. They took their time, an air of contentment thrumming between them.

When they pulled away, Harry returned Tom’s small happy smile before lighting the joint again, sharing it between them, one drag at a time. They were silent in the time it took, needing to digest everything that had happened, while basking in their proximity.

Despite it all, Harry had sorely missed having this sort of closeness with Tom. It felt so right to be in his arms again, to share in small moments, just the two of them. It felt even better without the torturous need to repress all his urges of a romantic nature.

They finished the joint, setting the ashtray on the windowsill and Harry's glasses on the nightstand, and crawled under the covers together. They both seemed to sigh in relief as they laid down together, and Tom shuddered from head to toe as Harry trailed his fingers over his arm in a soft touch.

"I've missed you so much," Tom whispered, wrapping his arms around Harry's body, holding him close to his chest.

Harry's heart sped up, aching with something he couldn't quite grasp—sorrow? regret for all the time they'd spent in separate beds longing for each other? Either way, he snuggled closer, his fingers tracing along Tom's spine instead. "I missed you too," he murmured, pressing kisses into his collarbone.

Tom made a happy sort of sound, pressing his nose into Harry's hair, a hand finding his thigh and holding on tight.

Harry tilted his head back, reaching up to catch his lips in a kiss that he drew out until they were both running out of breath. "Night, Tom," he murmured against his lips.

Tom kissed him again, a chaste press of lips. "Night, Harry."

Harry's eyes drooped, the weed hitting with the drowsy contentness of kissing Tom. "I love you," he mumbled sleepily.

A hand stroking along his cheek, his jaw, a small kiss pressed to his temple. Then, a whisper: "I love you too."

—Scene seven—

Harry woke up slowly, conscience emerging sluggishly from the depths of the dead sleep he'd been in. He was just on the wrong side of too warm, and he could feel every crease of the sheets that had imprinted into his skin, on his arm and face.

What really grasped onto him and raised him from the dead though were the kisses being pressed into his skin, on his cheek and all down his neck, while fingers danced across his waist.

He must have shuffled, or made a sound, because the attention stopped for a second, and Tom murmured, "You awake?"

Harry hummed, pressing his face into his neck as he stretched his legs out.

Tom laughed lightly, the sound echoing through his chest and into Harry's ears. His arm snaked around his waist and pulled him close, until Harry was almost lying on top of him. "Hello, gorgeous," he whispered, kissing the space beneath his ear.

Harry stretched against him, a happy smile spreading across his lips as his stomach fluttered. "Hello," he mumbled, cracking his eyes open as he pressed an open mouthed kiss to Tom's sharp jaw.

Tom smiled, pulling him closer for a proper kiss. It was such a quiet and peaceful moment, the only sounds from the room were that of their kisses, the sheets rustling around them every time they moved. Outside, through the still open window, a cool early morning breeze brushed over them, the trees shuddering in the distance while all the birds chirped, waking up.

"Did you sleep okay?" Harry asked once they'd pulled away long enough to get a good look at each other, lying side by side. He was stroking Tom's hair back softly, adoring everything about his soft happy look, face pressed into the pillow, eyes golden brown and bright on Harry.

He hummed, nodding. "You kept me nice and warm," he said, leaning closer to press a lingering kiss to his lips.

"How are you feeling about the play tonight?"

Tom groaned, giving Harry a pointed look before kissing him again. "This is why I didn't think *we* were a good idea, I couldn't give a shit less about the play tonight, all I can think about is *you*."

Harry bit his swollen bottom lip, giggling stupidly. He shrugged, inching closer still. "Well, we nailed it last night, we know people love it, we know our lines and stuff. Doesn't matter if we're less invested today, does it?"

“Hm, I suppose,” Tom said, tilting Harry’s chin back with a hand in his hair to kiss him deeper.

Breathless, Harry pulled away with a smack of lips, eyes hooded. “What time is it?” he asked, voice deeper as he registered Tom’s glassy eyed look, pupils blown out.

“Just after eight,” he replied in a husky whisper, tongue darting out to lick over his bottom lip, leaving it glistening and enticing.

“Plenty of time then,” Harry said, climbing on top of him, straddling his hips as he bent down to kiss him again.

Tom moaned into it, surprised, as his hands moved to grip Harry’s hips, pulling him closer until Harry rolled his hips down and Tom pressed up. They both gasped at the friction, their movements becoming more insistent and urgent.

“Good fucking idea to put our boxers back on,” Harry grumbled as he pressed wet kisses into Tom’s throat.

Tom pulled his hair gently. “Shut up,” he said in a breathy whisper.

“Have to take them off again now,” Harry mumbled, nipping at Tom’s throat. He got a hand on his hip and moved downwards, pressing open mouthed kisses along his skin as he went; to his chest, his stomach, his hips, his thighs, while Tom arched into him, a hand in his hair as he moaned breathlessly.

Under the covers, Harry pulled his boxers off, mouth watering as his cock sprang free, and discarded them in the bedsheets, before laying on his front between Tom’s spread legs.

Tom threaded his fingers through his hair and pulled as Harry sucked bruises into his thighs. There was something exciting about being hidden under the covers, illicit, dirty.

When Tom was panting, hips pushing up against the cover everytime Harry scraped his teeth against his skin, moaning out his name, Harry moved up and mouthed along the length of his cock, tongue licking up the shaft in a long stroke, catching the bead of precum on the tip of his tongue.

Tom shuddered at the contact, moaning in the back of his throat, hips flexing up involuntarily as Harry sucked the head into his mouth. They both moaned, Harry’s tongue wrapping around him languidly.

It was the most arousing thing, and Harry rubbed his cock into the mattress as he sucked him off, going further down with every drag of his mouth until Tom’s cock was slipping into his throat. He swallowed around him, breathing heavily through his nose as he blinked against the dizzying spike of arousal at every one of Tom’s bitten off and muffled moans.

It was so heady and intoxicating that neither of them heard the noise from downstairs, or the steps coming up the stairs, until the door burst open.

Harry froze, Tom's cock resting heavy on his tongue, just tickling the back of his throat. Tom jerked in surprise, fingers tightening in Harry's hair as he heaved a breath.

"Hello," he rasped, utterly breathless, "Sirius," he greeted, and Harry cringed, "Remus."

Silence met his words, and Harry popped off with the most arousing, yet awfully timed wet noise that rang loud in the silent room.

He crawled up Tom's body, careful to keep the cover on him until he emerged from the sheets, biting back a laugh at Tom's embarrassed flush. He turned to look towards the door, where Sirius was still standing with a hand still on the handle, eyes wide and frozen in shock, while Remus stood to the side with his head in his hands.

He did laugh then, covering his face in his hands as a heated blush crept up his cheeks. "Hi," he said, clearing his throat around the fucked out quality of his voice, "mind shutting the door?"

"Remus catch me," Sirius said dramatically, eyes trained on Harry, "I'm going to faint."

"Sirius," Remus groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose, "don't be a drama queen just shut the fucking door."

Sirius continued staring at Harry, blinking in shock. "You have thirty seconds," he said sternly, and Harry snorted, "don't laugh you little shit. You've got thirty seconds to get yourself decent and don't even *think* about going back to whatever you were doing."

"Yes, sir," Harry said with a derisive laugh.

"Thirty seconds," he repeated, pointing at him, "or I'm dragging you out myself."

"Got it, now shut the fucking door," Harry said, shooing him away.

He went begrudgingly, though he didn't leave from in front of the door. Proof of that fact presenting itself in the form of him shouting, "Sucking cock, Remus! Honestly! Can you believe it?"

And Remus replied with a defeated, "I can actually, Sirius. You're being ridiculous."

Harry snorted, turning back to Tom who had his hands over his face, cheeks beet red. Harry grabbed onto his wrists, prying them away. "What a wanker," he murmured, leaning down to kiss him.

Tom groaned, kissing him back but pushing away a second later. "Get off me so we can get dressed, I don't fancy him coming in again."

Harry laughed, pressing closer again.

"No, Harry, come on," Tom urged, sitting up with Harry in his lap. "I mean it, how am I supposed to make a good impression now?"

“Don’t worry about it,” Harry whispered, kissing his cheek.

“No, seriously,” Tom said, and Harry saw the vague panic in his eyes, “what am I gonna do if he decides I can’t come and live with you?”

“Oh,” Harry said, softening. “Oh, Tom,” he kissed his cheek, taking his face in his hands, “he’s just being a dramatic idiot. He doesn’t actually care, you know? He likes to pretend at playing parent sometimes. He’d never do that to me or you.”

“Are you sure?” Tom asked, returning the kiss Harry gave him.

“Yes,” Harry murmured, bumping his nose against his, “I promise. And even if he did change his mind, I’d figure something out with you.”

“Really?”

“Ten seconds!” Sirius shouted, banging on the door.

Harry rolled his eyes, huffing. “Yes, really,” he assured, kissing him again. “Coming!” he shouted back towards the door.

“You better not be trying to be funny Harry!” Sirius called back. “Use another word! I don’t like the mental image that conjures.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” Harry shouted, climbing off Tom who hurried to pull his boxers back on. He wrenched the door open when he was sure Tom was covered. “You’re insane,” he stated, staring at Sirius.

Sirius floundered. “*Excuse me*?” he said, offended.

“You’re insane,” Harry repeated, leaving the door to go into his wardrobe to get dressed. “Honestly, who doesn’t knock? This is your own fault.”

“*My fault*?” Sirius asked hysterically.

“Yes,” Harry said, hitting him with a t-shirt before pulling it over his head. It was one of his old crop tops—perfect for a summer’s day.

“How long has this even been going *on*?” Sirius asked, stepping into the room and stopping short. “Jesus Christ, in your father’s bed, Harry? God, it stinks of sex in here.”

“That hasn’t been dad’s bed in over a decade!” Harry exclaimed, laughing disbelievingly.

“Answer me, how long have you two been doing it? And why didn’t you tell me?”

Ah, Harry thought, that was the problem. Sirius was offended because Harry hadn’t *told* him.

“Since last night,” he said, softer.

“Oh,” Sirius said, calming down a bit. “Oh, well, that’s alright, I suppose.”

Harry turned to face him properly, tying the knot on his joggers. “Yeah so don’t pretend to be all pissy about a blowjob when we both know you don’t care about that—”

“Harry oh my *god*,” Sirius cut him off, grabbing his jaw a bit roughly to tilt his head to the side, “your *neck*!”

Remus snorted from behind him, mouth wide in amused surprise. Harry groaned, batting Sirius’s hand away.

“Oh Jesus Christ,” Sirius said, gasping again, “*Tom’s* neck.” He was looking over at Tom, over Harry’s shoulder. “Oh my god, that’s a *lot* of pent up frustration there—Jesus.”

“Alright, alright,” Harry said, shooing him off. “You’re being annoying now, leave it to rest.”

“Yeah, come on, Sirius,” Remus said, grabbing onto his arm, “leave them be.”

“But—”

“They’ll be down in a minute,” Remus said, rolling his eyes. “You can live without him for that long, surely.”

Harry shut the door behind them, shaking his head before turning back to Tom. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay,” he said, nose scrunched up as he put on a t-shirt—one of his dad’s old ones.

Harry went up to him. “Still want to live with him?”

Tom smiled, nodding. “As long as I’m with you.”

Harry grinned, reaching up to drag him down. “He’ll calm down once he gets over the shock of it.”

Tom hummed, holding his hand against Harry’s cheek, brushing at the hair on his temple. He kissed him, gentle and sweet, lingering. “Wish we could stay in bed together all day,” he murmured.

“Me too, but we’d best go down.”

“I suppose,” Tom said, heaving a sigh. He looked so pretty and dishevelled, soft in the morning light pouring in from the window. His pale skin was blotchy with the remnants of a blush, and his neck really was a mess, mottled with purple stains.

Harry reached up, kissing him again—just because he could. “Okay,” he said, pulling away, shivering at the feeling of Tom’s hands on the exposed skin of his back, fingers slipping under the chain, “come on.”

They left the room as quietly as they could, creeping downstairs.

“It was mad,” Theo was saying, voice carrying to them, “I swear the walls were shaking, the bed was banging against the wall, Harry was moaning like a whore—no seriously, I’m not joking—”

Tom cleared his throat from behind Harry as they got to the library, and everyone turned to them. “Morning,” he said pointedly.

Everyone was already gathered around the table, with Sirius, Remus, Hermione, and Ron. And, looking on with wide eyes, Amelia sat between Gaspar and Abraxas.

“Oh God,” Hermione said, hiding a laugh as she held her hands in front of her mouth. “Harry your *neck*,” she burst out laughing, eyes wide.

“Best case scenario, eh, mate?” Ron said, looking far too amused.

“Okay come on,” Harry said, blushing into the roots of his hair, “let’s hear it so we can be done with it.”

“Amelia,” Tom said, tensing behind him. “What—you’re here early.”

Her cheeks were red, and her eyes kept flicking between him and Harry. “Yes, I came with er—Harry’s family. I hope you don’t mind, Tommy.”

“No,” he cleared his throat awkwardly, “no it’s fine.”

She tilted her head to the side, nose scrunching up with a smile. “You could’ve told me, you know, Tom. I’m sorry you felt like I might think less of you for your relationship with Harry.”

“No, no, no,” he said quickly, looking like he’d rather be anywhere else. “It’s—uhm, new. Last night, actually. So—”

“Oh, I see,” she said, smiling at them, “congratulations then.”

“Thanks,” he said stiffly.

“Okay, how was it?” Theo asked eagerly, leaning forward on the table. “Sounded fucking *amazing*.”

Tom clicked his tongue in annoyance, hand on Harry’s shoulder. “It was, next question.”

“Harry,” Theo said, turning to him with a manic grin, “how big is Tom’s cock?”

“He’s not answering that you fucking weirdo,” Tom said, a look so distasteful on his face it made Harry laugh.

Harry looked back at Theo and mouthed, “*Massive*,” making him burst out into laughter.

Tom pinched his waist. “I saw that,” he said disapprovingly. “Enough with the press conference Jesus Christ.”

“Well, we’re happy for you,” Gaspar said brightly.

“You are together now, right?” Rick asked.

“Thanks Gaspar, and yes,” Harry said, going over to the table under all the stares to get the coffee pot that was sitting empty, much to his dismay.

“Well, it’s about time, congratulations,” Alphard said kindly. “And Tom, I hope you’re sure about this.”

“Oh, don’t fucking threaten me, Alphard,” Tom said, an almost sneer on his face, very reminiscent of the Tom Harry was introduced to at the beginning of the year.

“I’m just saying,” Alphard said, holding his hands up, “don’t do that again.”

Harry cleared his throat. “We don’t need to talk about that.”

“Anyway,” Theo said, snickering, “congrats on losing the v card Tommy boy, it was about time.”

Tom just stared at him, unimpressed. Then: “Honestly Theo, kill yourself.”

Harry snorted so hard he coughed, holding onto the back of Rick’s chair to steady himself while the others fell over into laughter.

“Kill me yourself, coward,” Theo taunted.

“I just might,” Tom said seriously.

“Come on,” Harry said around a laugh, holding onto Tom’s arm as he got to him, “come make some more coffee with me.”

“Ah, ah, ah,” Sirius piped up, and Harry could no longer ignore his presence.

He sighed, turning around reluctantly. “What is it?”

“Well, introduce me to your boyfriend, Harry,” he said, appalled.

Harry rolled his eyes at the dramatics. “You met him yesterday, Sirius, come off it.”

“It’s fine,” Tom said softly, a complete change in demeanour, as he leant down and pressed a kiss into his hair before inching past him to go over to Sirius, holding out his hand. He flashed an easy smile, perfectly charming and respectful if it weren't for the hickeys littering his skin. “Tom Riddle, Harry’s boyfriend, nice to meet you.”

Sirius eyed him, taking his hand slowly. “You washed your hands, I hope.”

Where Harry wanted to die, Tom only smiled and said, “I didn’t have time to get my hands on Harry, don’t worry. We were interrupted, see?”

Sirius baulked for a second, and Harry was sure it was the first time anyone had ever shut him up. And then he laughed, clapping Tom on the shoulder with his other hand. “You’re alright, Tom,” he said amicably, and Harry had a moment of realisation: his Godfather was well and truly insane. “Though I do have a gun,” he added seriously, and Harry was comforted in his assessment of his character.

“Don’t mind him,” Remus said, a hand on Sirius’s shoulder, “he’s finding his feet with the whole parent thing. He doesn’t have a gun, I can assure you of that.”

Tom laughed easily as he took his hand back.

“Go on, go and make your coffee,” Remus added kindly. “Oh, and could you grab those ginger biscuits I saw in the cupboard yesterday?”

“Yeah, ‘course,” Tom said, turning back to Harry and following him into the kitchen.

There was no door in the kitchen, more of an archway that led into the hall with the stairs, but they were hidden from sight. Harry handed the empty pot to Tom and perched on the counter beside the coffee machine. It still gave him that warm and giddy feeling, seeing Tom interact with his family, especially now that he was an extended part of it.

“What are you grinning about?” Tom asked, eyeing him as he filled the machine up.

“I like that you try with them, you know?” Harry said quietly, leaning back on his hands.

“Well, it wouldn’t do if the people you love hated me, would it?”

“No I suppose not,” Harry said, reaching out to him with his toes, “but thank you anyway.”

Tom hummed, setting the machine into motion, coffee trickling into the pot slowly. His hands found Harry’s thighs almost immediately as he stepped between them. “Anything for you,” he murmured, closing the distance to kiss him, pulling him to the edge of the counter so that they were pressed together.

Harry hummed into it, hands threading through his hair as he kissed him back.

Tom sighed as they separated, a string of spit holding them together, vanishing as he licked across his bottom lip. “You know,” he said, voice gruff and eyes heavy lidded, “it’s a proper shame we didn’t get to finish what *you* started this morning.”

Harry huffed out a laugh, humming as he shuffled closer, hands roaming down to pull Tom closer by his waistband. “We still need to shower, we can try and go in together. We’ll have to be quiet though.”

He hummed, lips parted as he leant back in to kiss Harry deeply, tongue dipping past his lips, and hands inching around to squeeze Harry’s arse.

After a few minutes of mindless snogging, nothing but the sounds of the coffee pot filling up and the vague chatter from next door filtering through their ears, someone cleared their throat right beside them.

They broke apart with a jump, both breathless as they turned towards the intruder.

It was Theo—of course it was Theo. He grinned at them, lifting his eyebrows suggestively. “You gonna fuck on the counter or what?”

“Piss off,” Tom said, hands still holding tight onto Harry’s arse, keeping them close.

“I think that shower plan is a good idea,” he said, leaning nonchalantly on the counter beside them, “though you’d have to be quieter than last night. Honestly, what the hell were you doing in the shower? Harry made the most erotic sound—”

“Will you shut up,” Harry snapped, no venom behind it. He turned to Tom, eyes narrowed. “And don’t you even *think* about saying anything about that.”

“Oh, I’m dying to know now,” Theo said, interest spiking.

Tom smirked, leaning in to kiss him again. “I wouldn’t dream of it,” he murmured, squeezing his arse before letting go and going back to the coffee, leaving Harry bereft and quite hard.

“Need me to take his place?” Theo asked, tongue swiping against his bottom lip as he walked his fingers up Harry’s thigh.

“Theo, I’ll kill you,” Tom said seriously, taking the pot of coffee out of the machine. “I’m not joking, hands off.”

“Possessive, sexy,” Theo said, grinning up at Harry as he took his hand back.

“What do you even want?” Harry asked, wiping at the corner of his mouth conspicuously.

“To bother you, of course,” he said, pushing off the counter, “I knew you’d sneak in here for a snog, maybe a quick handjob. Don’t forget the ginger biscuits for daddy-in-law, Tommy,” he added before taking off.

“Wanker,” Tom huffed, grabbing the biscuits from the shelf. “Come on, gorgeous, let’s go back.”

Harry bit his cheeks through his smile, following happily.

“How come you’re here so early anyway?” Harry asked as they got back into the library.

“Well, we don’t know what your schedule for today is,” Remus said, lighting a cigarette.

“Same as yesterday, I think, right?” Harry said, looking at the others for approval.

Alphard hummed. “Might need a bit more time in the makeup department for you two,” he said, covering a snicker with a cough, “hide the hickeys—if that’s even possible, Jesus, you really didn’t hold back.”

“I hadn’t even thought of that, to be honest,” Harry said, rubbing at his neck self-consciously.

“Well, you probably had something else in mind at that point,” Hermione said, pressing her lips together to suppress a laugh.

“Hm hm,” Harry hummed, glaring at her as he poured himself some coffee.

“What actually happened?” Alphard asked unexpectedly. “Like, what made it happen between the two of you? God knows you’ve had thousands of opportunities to get together, why now? You didn’t even speak to each other last night at the party.”

“Oh, er—well,” Harry said, struggling to find his words. He looked over at Tom who was sitting between Amelia and Gaspar, having moved him up. “It just—one of us confessed after the play.”

“Confessed what?” Alphard said, frowning. “I can’t see you confessing, Harry, you made it clear that you didn’t want to.”

“Wasn’t me,” Harry said evasively, looking for a seat to sit down in. There was one open next to Sirius and he was quick to take it.

“Tom confessed?” Theo said, jaw hanging open. “You’re kidding me.”

“What is so shocking about that?” Tom said, rolling his eyes as he lit a cigarette, tossing the pack down the table towards Harry.

“It just—is,” Theo said, frowning.

“I didn’t *mean* to,” Tom said, rubbing at his temple. “Well—I meant it, of course,” he added quickly, looking up at Harry who smiled at him. “It just—it slipped out.”

“Well,” Theo said after a bit of a stunned silence, “thank God it did, right?”

“Wait, Theo, did you *know*?” Harry asked disbelievingly.

Theo turned to him with a guilty look. “I did,” he said, holding his hands up, “and I swear I tried to convince him to tell you because I knew you fancied him too—mind he didn’t know that he was *in love* with you, he wouldn’t admit it—but I promise I did everything I could to make it work. And he made me swear to not tell you, and I couldn’t break a promise.”

“You could’ve told me,” Alphard said, holding his hands out in defeat. “I could’ve weasled it into Harry’s mind—what the fuck, were you just gonna let it never happen?”

“God you’re all so gay,” Rick said, pinching the bridge of his nose, “they’re together aren’t they? End of. Jesus.”

“That’s rich coming from someone who snogged Gaspar *again* last night!” Theo said.

Harry gasped, and even Tom’s eyes were wide.

Gaspar groaned. “Why are you dragging me into this? For fuck’s sake I’m nothing but nice and respectful to you all—you just had to open your big gob didn’t you, Rick?”

“We were drunk,” Rick said by way of explanation. “It was a dare—”

“*You* dared Gaspar to kiss you,” Abraxas supplied with a laugh.

Harry snorted, shoulders shaking with laughter. “God I wish I’d seen that.”

“It was a weird fucking night let me tell you that,” Theo said, shaking his head. “These two tongues down each other’s throats, and then coming back to hear you two filming a porno.”

“Big night for gay rights,” Alphard joked, making Ron laugh so hard he almost fell off his chair.

“D’you know what this reminds me of?” Sirius said quietly, looking at Remus with a sad look in his eyes.

“What?” Remus asked, visibly concerned by Sirius’s shift in mood.

He smiled, shaking his head. “Remember the winter party in sixth year? When me and James had a big argument—remember why?” Remus' eyes lit up with the memory and Sirius laughed. “‘Cause he was chatting Reggie up, so drunk he could barely stand up properly and yet there he was, trying to get into my brother’s pants!”

“God, you were so mad,” Remus said softly. “Regulus wasn’t even interested from the looks of it but you blew up—God.”

It was the first time Harry had ever heard anything about this, and he watched them with parted lips and a rapidly beating heart.

“I wonder what would’ve happened if I hadn’t intervened,” he wondered with a frown, picking at a splinter in the wood absentmindedly.

“No point in that, love,” Remus said quickly. “Best to just remember the way James jumped out of his skin when you caught them and collapsed into a puddle of vodka on the floor. If I remember rightly Regulus called him pathetic, right?”

Sirius laughed, mood easing. “Right, and stepped right over him while I was hauling him back up onto his arse.”

“Wait—” Harry said haltingly, confused— “Dad wasn’t straight?”

“Yeah—well,” Sirius said, turning to him as he tilted his head, “he just never cared whether the person he was after was a lad or a lass, you know? Your mum was too, did you not know that? She had a girlfriend at school.”

Remus hummed. “Mary Macdonald, remember her? She came to your first birthday parties, your mum and her stayed very good friends.”

“She was in mine and James’ year,” Sirius added.

Harry crumbled onto the table a bit, mind reeling with the revelations. “Why did I not know this?”

“Well—” Sirius said, looking at Remus— “I thought you did, to be honest.”

“How would I have known this?” Harry asked a bit hysterically. “But dad always said mum was his one true love.”

Sirius scrunched his nose up. “Yeah,” he said, “but that doesn’t mean he didn’t shag other people, you know?”

“Sirius!”

“And you know your mum couldn’t stand your dad in school, you can’t be surprised she saw other people.”

“Ah,” Harry said, scratching at his hair, “I didn’t need to know that.”

“What?” Sirius said, leaning back in surprise. “Don’t tell me you’re homophobic, Harry. You were sucking Tom’s cock half an hour ago.”

“Sirius!” Harry shouted again, burying his flaming face in his hands. “Don’t take the mickey, I’m just surprised is all.”

Sirius laughed, shaking his shoulders and roughing up his hair. “Just teasing, but yeah, you know where you get it from now.”

“I don’t think it’s hereditary,” Hermione said from across the table.

“God it’s not a disease, Hermione,” Harry said.

She rolled her eyes. “Did I say that you idiot? I was just pointing out that what Sirius said was most likely false.”

“Maybe it is a bit weird,” Remus said pensively. “Sorry Haz, maybe we shouldn’t mess with the memories and perception you have of his parents.”

“No it’s fine,” he said, heaving a sigh. “Weird fucking day,” he mumbled.

“I barely saw you last night, Harry,” Abraxas said, thankfully changing the subject. “How did the party go for you? I bet you got a lot of offers.”

He groaned, nodding. “A ton, yeah. Your mum actually, Rick,” he said, turning to him, “saved me, kind of, from that er—what’s his name? Ernest? Ernest Carcan was it?”

“Oh gosh,” Amelia said suddenly, eyes wide, “he was there last night?” She looked around at them all, surprised at their confused looks. “Have none of you seen the papers? Done for sexual assault on boys under his wing.”

“Oh my god, yes I did see that!” Hermione said, gasping. “That was only a few months ago! What in the world was he doing here?”

“Trying to recruit Harry for his harem, apparently,” Theo said with a snort, and Harry smacked him upside the head.

“Wait—he gave me his card too,” Alphard said, looking horrified, “my *mum* introduced me to him.”

“What the fuck, that’s mad,” Gaspar said, concerned.

“What? Were we not pretty enough for him?” Rick said with a raised eyebrow. “I didn’t get his card.”

“Well, Harry and Alphard are the prettiest of us all,” Theo said, “objectively speaking.”

“I best not catch sight of him tonight,” Sirius said seriously, “or he’ll be on his arse before he can even *think* to dish out anymore cards.”

“What did he say to you, Harry?” Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. “I can’t remember much, it was right at the beginning of the party just after —” he gestured to Tom vaguely— “you know, so I was a bit out of it. But I don’t remember him being inappropriate or anything, just talked a lot. I didn’t listen much. Anyway, what about you lot? Anything interesting?”

They chatted for a while about the party, everyone saying who they’d gotten offers from. Harry and Tom had a very similar list.

“Well, that’s all well and good, but we’ll set you up with my agency, yeah?” Sirius said, pouring himself some more coffee. “All of you who want to, of course. No need for these idiots panting to give you their cards.”

While Harry had always known this was an option, it read on the other boys’ faces that they hadn’t been expecting it—and Sirius didn’t seem to realise what he was offering them.

The thing was, Sirius was maybe a bit more famous than even Harry realised. He was a world renowned actor, could realistically get any role he cared to do. At this point in his career, all he had to do was call someone whenever he wanted to play a part, and even then, he didn’t *have* to—he was set for life.

He’d been the star of the show at school, an unreal sort of talent, once in a generation. And, as such, he’d been taken on by the leading agency in England, with direct branches all over Hollywood in the US.

One of the reasons for why Harry couldn’t live with him earlier was that, at the time, he’d been tied to multiple contracts over in America, huge blockbusters that raked in millions with every release, and he was the star in most of them.

He was the number one name in his agency, the selling point and most likely one of the names keeping them afloat. It was any actor's *dream* to be a part of it.

“That would be—uhm—amazing,” Theo said, clearing his throat. “Would your agency be okay with it?”

Sirius waved a hand. “They’re looking for new recruits, new talent, you know? They asked me to keep an eye out while I was here actually, but, of course, you’re all more than good enough in my opinion. That play was something else, lads, honest.”

“Well, Tom can take most of the credit for it, to be fair,” Theo said. “He wrote the basis of it, and all that. And he tended to take direction.”

“Well, well done, Tom,” Sirius said sincerely, “you did a mint job.”

Amelia was beaming beside him, the shine of pride reflecting in her eyes.

“Cheers,” Tom said, smiling lightly as Amelia patted his arm.

“Right,” Harry said, stretching, “time’s ticking, I’m gonna go for a shower.” He tried not to look over at Tom as he said it, but he did, catching the way he was immediately more alert.

“Shall we go into town for lunch?” Sirius asked, leaning back as Harry got up. “That café looks nice.”

“Oh it’s very good,” Abraxas said. “I went there with Viola a few times, and it’s really very good.”

Harry snuck off as Abraxas kept Sirius’s attention, padding up the stairs. He went into his room to grab a towel along with a clean pair of boxers and his shampoo and stuff, before heading along the hallway.

Just as he was about to step into the room and wait for Tom, seeing him stand up over the bannister, Sirius piped up.

“Ah, ah, ah, lover boy, sit back down,” he said, shaking his finger in the air.

Tom stopped short, hanging his head imperceptibly. “Why? Do you need something?” he asked, polite, respectful—he was nailing it.

Sirius laughed, shaking his head. “I know that look, and don’t think I didn’t notice the look Harry gave you—” he looked up at the bannister where Harry was peering over— “Harry who is currently waiting for you, correct?”

“Sirius, come off it,” Harry grumbled.

“I’m not taking the chance of hearing you two get off,” he said pointedly. “Do what you want once we’re home, soundproofing’s brilliant at the house, you know that. I won’t police you there, so rest assured. But it’s not great here, I’m not having it. Plus it’s rude to run off and have sex, especially at ten in the morning.”

“Here,” Harry said, catching his attention. He stuck up his middle finger at him and enunciated every word as he said, “I hate you.”

Sirius only snorted. “See?” he said, turning to Remus with a happy smile. “This is what I’ve wanted for years, a real guardian-teenager relationship. This is amazing.”

“You’re insane!” Harry called, shutting the door a bit forcefully behind him. What a pain.

He stepped under the spray of the shower, frustrated and *hard*. He’d let the anticipation take over and he was preemptively turned on. Groaning under the water, he wrapped a hand around his cock, remembering what had happened in this very shower stall only the night prior.

It wasn’t difficult, and though his wank was born of furious frustration, and it didn’t have the same satisfaction as Tom’s hands on him, the memories were enough to make him cum harder than he usually did by himself.

Panting in the aftermath, legs shaking a bit, he rinsed away the evidence of it before beginning his actual shower. Not five minutes in, shampoo still foamy in his hair, there was a knock at the door.

For a second he kicked himself, feeling stupid for wanking, thinking it was Tom who had managed to sneak up.

“Yeah?” he called, a hopeful breathlessness to his voice.

“Harry! It’s Ron, can I come in?”

“Ron?”

“No, not Tom! Ron!”

Rolling his eyes, Harry just shouted, “Yeah, come in!”

Ron burst into the bathroom, kicking the door shut behind himself.

“What the fuck do you want?” Harry asked, staring at him in disbelief. “You better not take a shit, I’m not joking, you can wait for that.”

“Oh fuck off,” Ron huffed. “Need a piss, is that okay with you?” It was a sarcastic question, as he was already pissing by the time he asked it. “Bet you wished it was Tom didn’t you?”

“Fuck you,” Harry bit back, rinsing his hair.

Ron laughed raucously. “You so did! Sorry to disappoint, but well done, yeah? Must have been wild by the looks of it.”

“It was incredible, Ron, I swear,” Harry said, looking at his back, still standing in front of the toilet. “I mean,” he lowered his voice, though not that much, with the spray of the water—but

who else could he tell? He was dying to tell *someone*— "he made me cum *twice*, I passed out the second time, though, can you believe that?"

Ron whipped around, eyes wide as he zipped his jeans back up. "*Twice*?" he asked in disbelief. "Two different times, or?"

"Yeah, different times," Harry said, wiping the water from his face. "Once in the bedroom when we were, you know," he tilted his head, "and then in here."

"Oh, you were standing up?" Ron asked, nodding knowingly. "I bet that's why you passed out, you know?"

"Probably," Harry agreed. It felt so much like their talks under the showers after PE, Harry felt fifteen again.

"Did he—you know? *Do* you?"

Harry snorted. "Yeah, he preferred it that way, I didn't mind either way."

"How was it?" Ron asked curiously. "Did it hurt?"

"A bit," Harry admitted. "The fingers not so much, that felt *really* good actually, it's what got me off the second time."

"Oh wow, is it much different?"

"So much more intense," he said honestly, swallowing at the memory of it. "When you cum it's not just your cock—like, I swear I felt it in my *toes*, mate."

"Shit," Ron said, impressed. "Should I see if 'mione will give it a try?"

Harry looked at him, surprised. "I mean—if it's something you'd want to try, go ahead. Just make sure to use lube, you know? It's a wild experience at first, let me tell you that."

"Right, well it's good to know, finally. I've been waiting for you to do it with a bloke so you'd let me know what it's like."

Harry laughed, shaking his head as he rinsed the last suds off himself. "Idiot, get the fuck out anyway, this looks a lot weirder than it is."

"Oh shit, yeah," Ron said, wincing, "maybe Tom won't like that I came in."

"It's fine," Harry said, hoping it was. "Hand me that towel, will you?"

"Yeah, here. See you in a minute."

"Cheers, yeah."

Ron shut the door behind him, and Harry brushed his teeth and got dry before leaving the bathroom. He glanced over the bannister as he went, eyes landing on Tom, leg bouncing

anxiously beneath the table. For a second it all seemed surreal, everything that had happened the night prior and ever since. But there Tom was, an artwork of hickeys all up his neck, left there by Harry.

He continued on to the bedroom, lost in thought as he started drying his hair. Just as he was finishing drying himself, the door of the bedroom opened and Tom appeared in the doorway, closing the door behind himself.

“Does Ron always walk into the room when you’re showering?” he asked, a bit of a frown pinching his brows together.

“Sorry, no,” Harry said, grabbing his clean pair of underwear he’d been too wet to put on in the bathroom. “Habit from school. Communal showers, you know?”

Tom hummed. “He was in there a while.”

Harry laughed, looking over at him properly. “I was telling him about how good it was last night. He had some questions.”

“Oh?” Tom said, eyebrows raised in surprise.

Harry nodded, biting back a grin. “You’d have found it very flattering, I promise.”

There was a visible smile pulling at Tom’s lips that he tried to school, shaking his head as he changed the subject. “Amelia doesn’t seem to know what to make of it all. She can’t believe they’re all so nosy.”

“I bet,” Harry said, rolling his eyes. “Mad, the lot of them.”

Tom hummed, making Harry jump as he snuck up on him from behind and set his hands on his waist. “How was the shower?”

Harry smiled, turning in his hold to look up at him. “Alright, I suppose.” He leant in closer, voice dropping. “I got myself off thinking about you.”

Tom’s eyebrows rose in surprise, but there was no missing the way his pupils dilated and he leant closer, breathing short. “Did you?” he asked, already breathless.

Harry hummed, dragging him closer, arms around his shoulders. “Yeah,” he whispered, “I thought about what you did last night, in the shower.”

“Yeah,” Tom murmured, pulling him closer, cheeks rosy.

“It didn’t take long at all honestly,” Harry said, toying with the hair at his nape. “I was already so wired from this morning. I just couldn’t stop thinking about you.”

“God I wish I could’ve seen you,” Tom murmured, voice rough, and so visibly turned on it sent a thrill through Harry.

“Wish it would’ve been you.”

Tom groaned, pulling him in for a kiss that turned filthy very quickly—until Tom was backing him up against the wall by the door, their kisses open mouthed and full of tongue.

"Shit, *Harry*—" Tom hissed when Harry snuck a hand under his waistband. He was hard, and he pressed forward into the tight ring of his hand. He kissed him again, messy and overwhelming.

"Yeah," Harry murmured, dazed as he worked his hand over Tom's cock, the other holding onto his hair.

Tom took a shaky breath as he pulled back, grabbing Harry's wrist and pinning it to the wall behind him. "Pretty sure I've gone over the two minutes to get my stuff together your Godfather allowed me."

"What stuff?"

"Shower," Tom replied, bending down to kiss him again, softer this time, "where I'll be sure to think about you."

Harry groaned, stomach squirming as he knocked his head back into the wall. "Don't tell me that—I'm gonna be thinking about you rubbing one off in the shower now. No way I can go back downstairs."

"You're going to," Tom said, kissing along his jaw, driving Harry half mad with lust. "Finish getting dressed now. Put that see-through shirt on and those tight trousers, yeah?"

Harry laughed, freeing his hand still pinned to the wall to wrap around Tom's shoulders. "A bit much for today, don't you think?"

"I don't care," Tom murmured, pressing a chaste kiss to his lips, "you look incredible like that. You almost killed me when you appeared down the stairs dressed like that on my birthday."

Harry hummed, pleased. "Just for you then," he whispered against his lips.

"All for me?" Tom murmured, a playful lilt to his voice as he pressed closer still. "Aren't I lucky?" He ran his hands up and down Harry's bare ribs, over his hips, down his arse and his thighs. "All of this, just for me?"

"Idiot," Harry mumbled fondly, nibbling on his bottom lip.

Tom pulled away with a sigh, pressing one last kiss to Harry's temple. "I'd best go for a shower now."

"Wish I could watch," Harry said, pulling the pair of trousers Tom meant out of his wardrobe.

Tom laughed, gathering his stuff up in his arms before stepping up behind Harry and pressing a kiss into his hair as he went past. "I'll bet," he mumbled, sticking his tongue out as he left the room.

Harry smiled, shaking his head as he watched him go. He went back to getting dressed with a flutter in his stomach and a grin he couldn't shake off. When the door opened behind him he didn't even bother turning around as he said, "Forget something?"

"Not quite," Sirius replied, closing the door behind himself.

"Oh," Harry said, turning around in his surprise, "sorry, I thought you were Tom."

"S'okay," Sirius said with a smile. "Can I sit here?" He was gesturing to Tom's bed that had yet to be made, and Harry nodded.

"What's up?" he asked as he fastened his trousers, unbuttoning them almost immediately as he realised he had yet to put his shirt on.

"I just thought we could have a chat," he said quietly, something encouraging in his eyes as he looked up at him.

"Yeah, 'course," Harry said, trying to pry his mind away from the gutter of Tom wanking in the shower—the water had started running a couple minutes ago. "Sorry about this morning, I didn't hear you come up, and I don't think Tom did either."

"No, that's okay, bit of a shock, mind, but you know," Sirius shrugged. "I mean, your friends downstairs did try to warn me about *something*, I just didn't stay down long enough to listen, you know?"

"It's fine," Harry said with a small laugh. "I found it funny, though maybe apologise to Tom. He thought you were serious."

"I'm always Sirius," he joked with a blinding grin.

Harry rolled his eyes, having lost count of how many times he'd heard that joke. "Shut up."

"No, I'll have a word with Tom, don't worry," Sirius said seriously. "So, you two, eh?"

Harry was embarrassed by how fast his unshakeable smile spread across his lips, warmth bubbling up in him at the reminder. "Yeah," he said, the happiness palpable in his voice.

"Hermione was telling me a bit about how it all happened, just now."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, I just wanted to make sure, you don't think this is going a bit fast do you?" he asked with an almost apologetic frown. "I mean, love confessions, *sex*…"

Harry finished buttoning his shirt up, clearing his throat. "I know how it looks," he admitted, "but this isn't an impulsive hook up, we've been into each other for a *long* time—and there's history, too, you know? Honestly if we'd've acted like normal people we would've hooked up in December, had sex much sooner, and admitted to loving each other in like April or something. It's just—it all came to be at once, because we let it all linger so long."

Sirius was nodding along, leaning back on his hands. “I see, well, I’m really happy for you, Harry. I mean it. You’ve been into this bloke for a long time, I just hope he’s on the same wavelength.”

Harry frowned. “You don’t think Tom’s serious about it?”

“It’s not that,” Sirius amended quickly. “I think he really does mean it all but—he really upset you last time. I don’t want that to happen again.”

“I don’t think it will,” Harry said quietly, though Sirius had unknowingly seeded the first tendrils of doubt in his mind.

“Good. Now, come sit down.” He patted the bedspread next to him, beckoning Harry over who went with a confused frown on his face. When he was seated, Sirius put a hand on his knee and said, “Has anyone ever given you *the talk*?”

Harry blanched for a second, before he burst out laughing.

“Look, Harry, I know it’s weird but it’s my job to do this.”

“Sirius I am eighteen years old, and it’s *far* too late for the talk,” Harry said, still giggling. “You’re an idiot.”

“What? Tom wasn’t your first?”

Harry sobered up a bit, laughing as he shook his head. “Technically yes, but you know, I’ve hooked up with people before.”

“What? Like handjobs and stuff?” Sirius asked, and Harry tried not to pull a face at him saying *handjobs*.

“Yeah, exactly.”

“With boys or girls?” Sirius asked, looking genuinely shocked by this information.

Harry shrugged. “Both.”

“*Both*?” Sirius sputtered. “God, just like James you are.” He sounded both despaired and sort of proud. He shook his head in disbelief after a moment’s silence, and set his face into a serious one again. “But this was your first time going all the way, so to say?”

Heat creeping up his cheeks, Harry nodded.

“Okay, and were you safe?” Sirius asked, frowning.

“Er—” Harry coughed, looking out the window— “we used lube.”

“Yes I should fucking hope so,” Sirius said, frown deepening. “What about a condom?”

“Sirius—”

"*Harry*," Sirius said pointedly.

Harry groaned, rolling his eyes. "No, we didn't—"

"*Harry*!"

"But!" Harry cut in loudly. "It was his first time too, so it doesn't really matter."

Sirius looked taken aback, the authority he was clinging to slipping as surprise took its place. "Are you serious?" he asked in his gossip voice. "I thought his mate was kidding, was he really—?"

"Yes," Harry said with a laugh.

"Fucking hell, how's that possible? I mean—he is *fit*, Harry."

Harry snorted, nodding. "I *know*, but he was just never interested in anyone."

"Blimey," Sirius said, taking a moment to digest it before going back to his serious tone. "That still doesn't warrant not using protection, Harry. *You've* been with other people, though not all the way, sure, but STDs can transmit through other ways."

"Yeah, but come on," Harry said. "There's very little risk."

"I don't care, Harry, this could be serious," he pressed, and Harry realised he actually was very serious. "When we get home I'm taking you both to the clinic, just to make sure."

"But—"

"Harry, this is non-negotiable. I can't in good conscience let you have sex without at least *checking*, okay? It's the responsible thing to do."

Harry deflated, embarrassed beyond belief. "When did you get so responsible?"

"Since I realised I've been a shit guardian," Sirius said, putting a hand on his arm. "Now I'm not gonna get all overbearing—you and Tom can share a room at home, you can shower together, have all the sex you want—*but* I'll be there to make sure you're safe, fed, healthy, and have a roof over your head, alright?"

Harry softened, leaning into Sirius's touch a bit. He was a bit reticent, simply for the fact that without a proper guardian since his parents died, without much other choice he'd had to become incredibly self-sufficient, independent. It was nice though, to know someone was looking out for him.

"Okay," he said quietly.

"And I'll do that for Tom too," Sirius said decisively, "and Alphard, of course. In fact, I'll take you all to the doctor's at some point, God knows when the last time you've all been was. Did you know you're supposed to go at least once a year? Just for a checkup? And same for the dentist? I learnt that in rehab. And maybe you could all benefit from some therapy?"

Harry laughed, short, a bit disbelieving, but *so relieved*. He saw it then, in Sirius's eyes, that this time it would stick. There'd be no more drugs, no more rehab, no more *worrying*. "We'll see," he said, patting his hand, "all in due time, you know?"

"Yeah, I suppose," Sirius said, relenting. "I just want to do right by you all."

"I know you do," Harry said with a smile. "And we all appreciate it a lot."

Sirius smiled at him. "How was it anyway?" he asked, an air of mischief around him. "First times can be quite…harrowing."

Harry's blush came back in full force, his nose scrunching up. "Do we have to do this?"

"I'm only asking!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "It was fine," he said, "brilliant, even. Nothing harrowing about it."

"Not too sore?"

"Why do you assume *I'd* be sore?" Harry asked, offended.

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "You're the one limping around, not him."

"I'm not *limping*!"

"Well, no you're not, but at least that answered my question," he said with a grin.

"Oh, you shit," Harry said, hitting his shoulder. "No, I'm fine. Nothing too severe."

"You'll be okay for tonight?"

"Fine," Harry assured. "He was *very* gentle," he said suggestively, laughing at the way Sirius scrunched his nose up in distaste this time. "Very thorough, too—"

"Okay, okay," Sirius said, clapping his hands over his ears, "point proven! I'll stop asking."

Harry snorted, shaking his head at the dramatics. "You're an idiot."

The door opened quite abruptly, and Harry's mouth went dry at the sight of Tom with wet hair, droplets of water clinging to his bare chest, towel held loosely around his hips, showing off the V of his stomach.

"Oh," Tom said, hand tightening around the towel as he caught sight of them, "I didn't know you were in here."

"Jesus," Sirius mumbled, swallowing as he looked at Tom.

"Ah, ah!" Harry called, putting his hands over Sirius's eyes. "Take your eyes off my boyfriend," he said, checking him out for himself.

Tom rolled his eyes as Sirius struggled against Harry's hands. "Is he here to make sure you weren't waiting for me?" he asked Harry.

"No!" Sirius said, managing to rid himself of Harry's hands. "I just came to chat with Harry. We can let you get dressed now."

"I might just hang back here," Harry said casually.

Sirius laughed. "Yeah I bet," he said, eyes straying over to Tom again.

"I'll tell Moony you're checking Tom out," Harry said pointedly.

"Come on," Sirius said, rolling his eyes.

"You go, I'll be down in a minute."

"No way," Sirius chuckled. "Come on, up with you."

"You're evil," Harry grumbled, getting up, "and I hate you."

"Yeah, I bet you do, come on," Sirius said, unfazed. He went up to Tom's level and stopped, eyeing him quickly before patting his still wet shoulder blade. "You are one fit lad," he said seriously. "You'll be on the front covers of magazines before you know it."

Tom only laughed, reaching out to Harry and turning him around slowly when he got his hand in his, whistling low. "You look devastating," he said with a grin.

Harry blushed, biting his lip to control the force of his smile. "That's a very bold statement to uphold when you're basically naked."

"I mean it." He had a look in his eyes, a bit hooded, a bit dazed—and Harry shuddered with the knowledge that it was the look he had when he'd cum not long before.

He reached up on his tiptoes and pressed a quick kiss to his lips. "See you in a minute."

Tom hummed, tucking a bit of Harry's shirt into his trousers properly. "Be down in a second."

Harry left with Sirius, sitting down next to Amelia when they got back to the library.

"Is Tom done in the shower?" Rick asked.

"Yep," Harry said, fixing his collar.

"Good, I'll go in then," he said, getting up from his seat.

"Good chat?" Remus asked, smirking as he looked between Sirius and him.

Harry laughed. "Sirius was checking Tom out when he came back from his shower."

“Oh?” Remus said with a raised eyebrow as he turned to Sirius. “Am I too old for you now? Need something younger?”

“Moony!” Sirius exclaimed. “I would never do that to you. It just—surprised me is all. He’s *very* fit, believe me.”

“Don’t worry, Remus,” Harry said with a laugh, “Gaspar would be happy to fill in Sirius’s role.”

“While that is true,” Gaspar said, holding a finger up, “it is also highly inappropriate.”

Remus laughed, putting an arm around Sirius’s shoulders. “I’m flattered, truly. But I could never give this idiot up.”

“Aw, Moony,” Sirius said, looking up at him with heart eyes.

Harry rolled his eyes, turning towards Amelia while the chatter around the table picked up again. “I didn’t get much of a chance to speak to you last night,” he said regretfully, “did you enjoy the play? And sorry about the chaos here this morning.”

“Oh, it’s quite alright, Harry,” she said happily, her nimble finger wrapped around her mug of coffee. “Believe me, this is actually quite a holiday for me, the chaos of the orphanage is mad. And we’ve had our fair share of sexual scandals.”

“Oh really?” he said, amused by Amelia’s conspiratorial look.

“Really,” she said, in a way that told him he might not want to know the details. “And I adored the play, you and Tom were amazing together. The story was beautiful too, I cried at the end.”

“Thank you,” he said, smiling at her.

“Stolen my seat, Potter?” Tom asked playfully as he emerged in the library. He was wearing a white shirt, the first couple buttons still open at the top, and some of his signature black slacks.

Harry grinned. “I didn’t get a chance to talk to Amelia yesterday, as I was avoiding you, essentially, so I thought I’d have a chat.”

“How lovely,” Tom said sarcastically, planting a kiss on his head as he passed behind him. He took Harry’s old seat, between Sirius and Theo.

“You know,” Theo said, eyeing him, “sex really does suit you, you’re glowing, babe.”

“Don’t call me babe,” Tom replied blandly, picking out a cigarette. “In fact, you’re swaying into the territory of *don’t speak to me at all*, so tread carefully.”

“You know, you try and tell someone they look good,” Theo grumbled.

“In the creepiest way ever,” Harry said disbelievingly.

“How devastated are you on a scale of one to ten about losing your chances with both Harry *and* Tom?” Abraxas asked him.

Theo sighed dramatically. “Ten of course, Abraxas! What a question.”

“You didn’t have any chances to begin with,” Tom said pointedly.

“I bet I had my chances with Harry,” Theo said hopefully, looking over at him.

“Well?” Tom prompted when Harry didn’t say anything.

Harry laughed. “If I hadn't fancied Tom from the start you might have had your chances, yeah.”

“*What*?” Tom said, betrayed.

“Yes!” Theo exclaimed, sinking into his seat with his fists held in the air. “Yes!”

“Well, your chances are a definite *zero* now,” he said, looking pointedly at both him and Harry.

“Indeed they are,” Harry agreed, a pleased smile on his face.

As the morning wore on, Harry chatted with Amelia, Hermione joining in after a while. Other parents started to arrive around eleven, and they all got ready before traipsing off to the village, Harry under Tom’s arm as they walked.

They all spent the day together, Viola joining them during their lunch. Tom and Theo disappeared at some point in the afternoon, but Harry barely noticed, too occupied with Ron and Hermione’s tales of uni and work. As much as he wished he could’ve spent the day in bed with Tom, it wasn’t too bad.

—Scene eight—

At five they went back to the theatre to get ready for their last performance. The younger years were already there when they arrived, as they were a tad late, and they all gawked as Harry and Tom went past—straight to the dressing rooms where Luna would hopefully be able to help them with the hickey situation.

She burst out laughing as she saw them, and Lysandra, who was hanging out with her, turned beet red, eyes so wide Harry worried they'd pop out of their sockets.

"Of course I can help," she assured as soon as they asked. She sat them next to each other, both in front of the same mirror as she sat on the edge of the dressing table in front of them, trying different concealers to match their skin tones.

Lysandra, after a while, worked up the courage to ask, "Are—are you two, you know, *dating*?"

"As of last night, yes," Tom replied easily, looking over at her while Luna worked on Harry. "You did brilliantly last night, by the way. I didn't have time to tell you properly yesterday but you did great. I hope you weren't too nervous."

"It was okay," she said, a shy smile on her face, "my parents came to see me so I was a bit nervous because of that. But it was a lot of fun. And congratulations too, you go very well together."

Luna did an amazing job of covering their hickeys up, even though they ended up having to have makeup all down their necks and faces to make it look natural. The one on Tom's jaw was a bit trickier, but she got it covered up perfectly.

It took so long though that Theo had to be the one to go over the last checks with the younger years, making sure everything was ready and in place, and they no longer had time to do a full run-through of the play. They got ready instead, taking their time to put on their costumes and joking around in the dressing rooms.

The mood was happy, but there was an undercurrent of sadness—they all knew it was most likely their last time playing together, and it was most certainly their last time on this stage. No one acknowledged it but it was heavy in the air.

When they were ready, the theatre still empty, Tom asked everyone to gather onto the stage.

"I just wanted to say," he started, voice ringing loud in the space, "that we're very thankful for all the hard work you put into our play. Whether it be the art students who gave us the best set they could, or the theatre students who kept the secret of the play and were more than assiduous when it came to perfecting the technicalities of the play. It's no secret that without you all the play would not be as good as it is, would never even exist, actually. So thank you, and you can rest assured that we will be relaying our gratitude to the Professors."

He started the applause, and Harry and the others were quick to join in, until everyone was clapping for everyone else.

When the theatre started filling up, everyone hiding at their stations, Harry felt the echo of the chatter in the beat of his heart. It was thrilling, and still a tad nerve-wracking.

They seemed to all find each other, in the minutes leading up to the beginning of the play, that same air of almost nostalgia clinging to them.

“Ready boys?” Theo asked, wringing his hands together nervously.

“The beginning of the rest of our lives starts tonight,” Alphard said with a grin, huddling them all closer.

“Oh, don’t say that Alphie,” Gaspar said, squeezing his eyes closed. “I’m gonna miss you all so much.”

“Aw, Gaspar,” Theo said, a sparkle in his eyes. “It’s been a real pleasure, lads.”

“Oh stop it,” Tom said, pinching his ear from where he had an arm around him, his other around Harry, “you’re gonna cry.”

“Let’s make this the best we can,” Abraxas said, smiling at them all. “Let’s give the most memorable performance this school has ever seen.”

“No issue there, I don’t think,” Rick said happily. “We’ll do great, won’t we? We always do.”

“We will,” Harry said, squeezing Tom’s waist. “And hopefully we’ll get to work together in the future.”

“There’s no one else I would’ve wanted to spend this year with,” Tom said, uncharacteristically earnest. “It’s been a pleasure.”

“Okay,” Theo said, sniffing loudly. “Let’s do this. Love you all.”

“Love you too, Theo,” Harry said, smiling, before the huddle broke and he was whisked under Tom’s arm, a few steps away.

“We’ll be amazing, yeah?” he said quietly, holding Harry’s face in his hands.

Harry grinned up at him. “Of course we will,” he assured, pulling him down until they could share in a quick lingering kiss. “I love you.”

Tom smiled against his lips. “I love you too.”

The play started, and it went even better than the night prior. Everyone was on top of their game, the importance of this night palpable in the way they played. The shift in dynamic between Harry and Tom marked a shift in dynamic in their playing too, though, and it made it all *so much more*. It was all very *real*.

The playful flirtiness was real, the intimacy was easy. The dance was made even better by their need to touch each other. There was no hesitancy or careful hand placement. Instead of being on alert when Tom's hand drifted over his arse, Harry drew closer. It was a push and pull that was entirely electric, the chemistry palpable in the air around them.

Tom even dared to press a quick kiss to his lips when it was over, before he fell into Rick's arms offstage.

They snogged after, backstage, messing up their already dishevelled appearances, and Tom almost missed his cue when Act four started. The dazed look in his eyes as he stumbled onstage only served to add to the madness of his character, so it all worked out.

When the last scene came, Harry felt the sincerity in every word that passed between them, and it hit him that *they* had written this, that they'd expressed their feelings time and time again, through their characters. It made it all so much more real, it made the tears flow and the betrayal *hurt*. Every touch in that last scene was achingly tender.

When Harry delivered his last lines and fell into Tom's awaiting arms, the lights shining around them, the curtain closed for the last time. As the applause started beyond the curtain, they reached for each other desperately, eyes wide with adoration, and kissed right there, both still breathless from their performance.

As the others piled onto the stage, they separated, straightening themselves out, though they were grinning like idiots. The curtain opened again, and they were met with another standing ovation.

They all lined up, gripping each other with arms around one another's shoulders. In the soft orange lights of the theatre, Theo and Gaspar promptly burst into tears. Though, frankly, Harry did too, supported by Tom and Alphard on either side.

They took their bows and accepted the applause.

Sirius was shouting at them, applauding raucously, intent on outdoing everyone in the room. Harry waved at him through the tears in his eyes, as if to say, *this is all for you; this is all thanks to you*.

Cassandra rushed onto the stage and handed Tom a microphone, just as the noise was dying down.

Harry watched him as he cleared his throat before holding it up to his mouth.

"Thank you all for coming," he said, utterly breathless, a blinding grin on his face. "I should've said something yesterday, but it was all a bit hectic, as you can imagine. But thank you all, it was a pleasure to play for you tonight, and we're honoured you took the time to come. I speak for all of us when I express my gratitude, and when I turn to our Professors for that," Harry watched as they waved out at the audience, smiling, "who have been amazing, accompanying us through the years. We'd also like to thank the fifth and sixth years for making all of this production possible, most notably Cassandra," he gestured to her, and she clutched her clipboard to her chest, "who was an impeccable stage director."

She was applauded happily, and Harry grinned at her.

“We’d also like to thank Viola, Margaux, Louis, George, Ben, Jamie, and Lysandra for taking up the extra roles in the play, you were all incredible and brought to life the characters we’d envisioned. The art students of course, who made all of the set possible. I’d like to name Luna Lovegood and Dean Thomas in particular, who were in charge of making our costumes. They were absolutely phenomenal in bringing our visions to life and were a pleasure to work with.” He took a deep breath as the audience clapped again, going on as they quietened.

“This play was very personal to all of us, I think, and it was truly a labour of love from start to finish. It was a journey and a testament to our friendships, but most surprisingly, it was a journey of self-discovery. We found our feet and pushed our limits with it. Which leads me to my last thanks, most important, of course, to my classmates and *friends*—” he put emphasis on the word, finally acknowledging that they were *friends*, and Theo burst out crying all over again, clinging onto him— “Gaspar Avery, Alphard Black, Richard Lestrange, Abraxas Malfoy, Theodore Nott, and, of course,” he looked down at Harry, a fond smile on his face, “the only person I could have ever envisioned in this role, Harry Potter.”

He looked away as the applause grew loud, whistling and cheering out in the audience.

He cleared his throat again, gaining their attention. “I think it’s important to point out that Gaspar,” he pointed over to him, sobbing into Rick’s shoulder, “composed the piece for his monologue in Act three, scene one. And he composed the waltz for that same scene along with myself. All of these boys are incredibly talented and there is no one else I would have wanted to play with. As such, I do have one last request, if I can keep your attention for another few seconds—” he paused, taking a quick breath in the silence before he looked down at Harry— “Harry, I have a lot to make up for when it comes to you, and I was hoping you might accept to come to dinner with me tomorrow night?”

Harry blanched for a second, hardly realising he was being spoken *to*. People were whistling (Sirius, more than anyone else, which was wholly unsurprising). When it clicked, he covered his face in his hands in embarrassment, leaning into Tom’s side a bit more.

“Yes,” he said, uncovering his face. “You know I’d love to, you idiot.” He hadn’t expected his voice to carry over to the microphone, but it did, and the whistling from the students intensified.

“Brilliant,” Tom said brightly, unfazed by the situation. “Again, thank you to everyone who took the time to come and watch us—”

Theo snatched the microphone from him. “Thank you everyone,” he said, a sob wracking through him as he spoke shakily and the audience laughed, endeared. “Thank you to my six best friends in the whole entire world, I love you all so much!”

The audience laughed again, and the people gathered on the stage joined in.

Tom took the microphone back with an eye roll and closed the speech with a nice, “Yes, thank you Theo, for that. Thank you all, have a nice night. Goodbye.”

They accepted another round of applause, and bowed one last time, before exiting the stage. They were rowdy and boisterous as they made their way to the dressing rooms, though they weren't going to get changed, as it was customary to stay in costume after the final performance.

"What was that about?" Harry asked, pulling Tom into a corner of the room. His heart was beating madly as his mind was *just* catching up with what Tom had done.

"What?" he asked with a grin, dipping down to steal a kiss. "It'll be nice. Dinner, just you and me."

"Yes, I know that, but why ask me like that?" Harry asked, confused.

Tom shrugged. "A romantic gesture?" he said, hand brushing Harry's hair back affectionately. "Drama? Romance? I don't know—I just wanted everyone to know that tomorrow night I am taking you out to dinner."

"Well—" Harry said, swallowing around his racing heart and fluttering stomach— "thank you."

"That Italian place, yeah?" Tom said happily. "We can share again—and then we'll have the chapel all to ourselves. It'll be lovely, a first date."

"Oh," Harry said, unsure if his heart could take anymore of this Tom. To be fair, he'd expected them to just sink into their relationship, without much *romance*. It was an understatement to say he was *thrilled* at how invested Tom seemed. "I love you," he said breathlessly. "That—I can't wait."

"Glad you're excited," Tom said with a grin, leaning down to kiss him, effectively stealing away what little breath he had left. "And I love you too, but we've got to go to the party now."

"I—yeah," Harry said, still a bit stunned as he let Tom guide him away.

The hall was packed when they got there, and the people around them closest to the doors clapped as they arrived.

They were quickly ambushed by family and friends, all eager to compliment them and give them hugs.

"Oh, how lovely!" Amelia said, hands fluttering in front of her. "It's all so magical here. I'm so proud, I can't wait to tell the kids all about you, Tommy."

Sirius was falling over himself giving them all individual compliments, crushing Harry in a hug when he got to him.

Theo cried into his mum's arms while his sister made fun of him, and the ever stoic Averys were fawning all over a still very emotional Gaspar. They were all so *proud*, of all of them, and it was so heartwarming. Sirius made sure to gush over Alphard, whose parents had left

the night before and who, if Harry understood correctly, he most likely wouldn't be seeing again.

With the Lestranges came Chris who came over with a bashful smile and congratulated Harry on his performance, though Tom swooped in quickly with a possessive arm around his shoulders as he continued talking with Mr. Nott.

"I love your costume," Chris said, gesturing to Harry vaguely. "I forgot to mention it last night."

"Thank you," Harry said happily, "it was Tom who designed it initially."

"Well, I'm sure he had you in mind, with how well it suits you."

"I did," Tom cut in rather curtly before going back to Mr. Nott.

Chris smiled, nose scrunching up. He took up so much space, tall and bulky as he was, but there was nothing intimidating about him. "Dinner, eh?" he said, quite obviously embarrassed.

Harry smiled, hand on Tom's wrist. "Yeah," he said softly. "It's—new."

"Well, you look great together," Chris said quietly, though it was sincere.

Harry saw Mr. Nott leave out of the corner of his eye, and Tom turned back to him.

"I don't know if Tom's into rugby, but you've got a plus one to all the games," Chris went on jovially, "so you can bring him if you want."

"I will…endure it," Tom said, already looking pained.

Harry snorted. "I'll probably bring my mate Ron, Chris. Tom's not into rugby. At all."

"Ah well, you can't have it all I suppose," Chris said, giving Harry a smile before he turned to Tom and held his hand out which Tom took with no little amount of reserve. "Lucky man, Riddle," he said with a sigh. "Very lucky. Congratulations, to the both of you, and for the play, of course. It was fantastic."

"Thank you, Chris," Harry said, while Tom let go of his hand with a nod.

He left after clapping Harry on the shoulder, hand only lingering a second too long. It was still absurdly surreal to him that Chris was even *interested.*

"God, have some dignity," Tom mumbled, nose scrunched up in distaste. "What?" he said when he saw Harry's disapproving look, rolling his eyes. "There's no need to be so blatantly disappointed, I mean, you don't need to be an actor to at least pretend at genuineness."

"He is genuinely happy for us," Harry said with a laugh, setting a hand on his stomach. "You're just reading into it. It's not like he's in love with me."

“Don’t be naive, Harry, he *really*—and I mean, *really*—wants to fuck you.”

“Tom!” Harry hissed, feeling his ears go red.

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Tom said, smirking at him. “I’m sure he’d love to get a drink and maybe even dinner, who knows? And he’d *love* to talk about rugby and sports and get to know you—but believe me, the only thing he’d have on his mind during all that is you in his bed, on his cock.”

Harry sputtered, his neck feeling hot. He turned to face Tom properly, recovering slightly. “And that’s not you, of course.”

Tom’s smirk deepened. “Harry, I had you in my bed for months and I didn’t do anything—I think that proves how much I value *you* more than what your body can do for me.”

Harry bit the insides of his cheeks to suppress his smile, but he saw how Tom caught onto it, pleased. “You think very highly of yourself.”

“You like that about me,” Tom said easily.

“Oh yeah?” Harry said, stunned but so attracted to Tom’s blatant confidence. “Why don’t you tell me everything I like about you.”

“Come with me and I will,” Tom said slyly, backing up towards the exit.

Harry couldn’t do anything but follow, like a helpless fish caught on a hook. They’d had a few drinks already, and that was maybe why they were acting impulsively, but Harry couldn’t care less.

Especially when they got out of the Hall and dipped into an alcove next to it, hidden in the quiet shadows of the entrance hall.

“Go on then,” Harry said breathlessly, as Tom backed him up into the wall, caging him in, “tell me all about what I like about you.”

Tom grinned, leaning closer, hands on Harry’s hips. “You like that I’m smart,” he stated, leaning down to press a kiss to the crook of his neck, making his breath hitch. “You like that I’m charming—” another kiss, further up— “You like that I’m *attractive*—” another— “You like that I’m confident—” another, right under his ear, open-mouthed— “That I’m a bit *mean* —” Harry’s breath caught, and he swallowed as Tom pressed a kiss into his jaw.

Tom paused, tongue flicking out to lick Harry’s bottom lip, before he whispered, “I’m *exactly* your type, and you *love* that.”

Harry’s hands were in his hair, dragging him down for an open-mouthed kiss before he could even make sense of it. Tom went happily, pressing up against him. And just like that, they were two teenagers hiding in a secluded area of the school to snog stupidly.

One of Tom’s hands was hiking Harry’s thigh up around his waist, the other pressing him into the wall, and Harry had both his hands in his hair, pulling and pushing.

Harry pulled him off after a while, utterly breathless. Tom tried to dip back down but Harry pulled his hair back again, and his stomach coiled in arousal at the hiss of pain he let out. He tried to catch his breath quickly, before murmuring, "Those are the reasons I'm attracted, not why I love you."

Tom stopped, dazed eyes trying to focus on him properly. "Tell me," he whispered, breathless.

Harry swallowed. "I love that you're funny," he said, words tumbling out of his mouth, "that you always make me laugh. I love how much you understand me, that we can talk for hours and never get bored. I love how comfy you look in a jumper and sweatpants." His fingers softened in Tom's hair, no longer pulling but stroking softly. "I love how your feet are always cold, I love how you remember everything I tell you—everything important, anyway. I love that you're romantic." Tom was staring at him with parted lips and twinkling eyes, as if he'd never known people knew these things about him—and maybe they didn't.

Harry took a breath, but kept talking, words falling from his lips into the space between them, overcome with the urge to let Tom *know*.

"I love how much you love literature. I love how you look when you're tired, or when you've just woken up. I love how you play the piano. I love that you like sweet things. I love that fucking disgusting Aero mint chocolate you like. I love how cuddly you are. I love that you try to please my family. I love that you always ask after Sirius. I love how you can never decide what you want to eat when we order out. I love that I always get to share with you. I love—"

Tom cut him off, maybe for the best, by kissing him again. Urgent, desperate, hands around his thighs to lift him up until Harry wrapped his legs around his waist with a choked off moan. They kissed until Harry pressed his head back into the wall, swallowing down all the sounds trying to escape his mouth as Tom latched onto his throat, rolling his hips against him until Harry gasped around a moan desperately trying to break free, a murmur of "Tom" on his tongue.

Maybe it was for the best that they were interrupted, because by that point, they were well on their way to rutting against each other until they came in their pants.

As it so happened, they were interrupted by someone clearing their throat behind them.

Tom froze, muttering a quiet, "Shit."

Harry blinked up at the ceiling, trying to get his breathing back in order as he dared peek over Tom's shoulder, finding none other than Professor Dumbledore behind him. "Oh fuck," he said unintentionally. "Shit, Tom, put me down."

Tom did so, wiping the corner of his mouth once he'd put him back down. Harry cleared his throat, eyes flicking to Dumbledore who was sporting an amused sort of smile.

"Teenagers," he said wistfully, and Harry saw the way Tom tensed up, his eyes wide in horror as he looked at Harry before turning around slowly.

“Professor,” he said, cringing.

“No need to look so guilty, Tom,” Dumbledore said happily, “we’ve all fallen victim to the woes of adolescence.” Harry didn’t much want to imagine Dumbledore snogging anyone, so he chose to ignore that statement. “It is I who is sorry for interrupting, I merely thought here may not be the most adequate place for your shenanigans.”

“No it’s our fault,” Harry cut in awkwardly. “*We’re* sorry,” he said, cringing, “sorry.”

“Quite alright, Harry,” he said kindly. “I was just coming back from the kitchens, you see. They had these fantastic lemon bars earlier, and I simply had to have another one.” Harry looked at Tom, biting his lip at how devastatingly dishevelled he looked; hair mussed and lips kiss bitten. “But I am glad to have come upon you boys,” Dumbledore added seriously, “to commend you on your performance. Phenomenal, of course.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Tom said, clearing his throat.

“I wanted to make sure that you were ready for your graduation ceremony tomorrow, too,” Dumbledore said. “Ten o’clock sharp.”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry said, nodding.

Dumbledore smiled, looking at Tom as he said, “It should also be known that Honour’s students usually make a speech.”

Tom stilled. “Pardon?”

“I thought it should simply be a fact to be known,” Dumbledore said cryptically. “Of course, we will not know if there even is an Honour student until tomorrow.”

“Of course, Professor,” Harry said, trying to fight down his grin as he gripped a still shocked Tom’s arm. “We’ll keep it in mind though, just in case.”

Dumbledore grinned, eyes twinkling. “Exactly, my dear Harry. There is something I wanted to speak to you about in particular, if you have a moment.”

“Of course,” Harry said, confused. He’d never really had much one on one time with Dumbledore, though he’d always been nice. “Is here okay?”

“Oh, fine,” he said, clearly not minding that Tom was there. “I am sure Tom already knows, if your proximity is anything to go by.” Harry blushed up into the roots of his hair. “I simply could not let you go without letting you know that I knew.”

“Knew what, sir?” Harry asked carefully, confused.

“Well,” Dumbledore said, smiling still, “I was the one to review your application, of course, and then I reviewed your audition with Professors McGonagall and Snape, though solely I looked at your application.”

Harry’s blood ran cold in preemptive dread. He held onto Tom a bit tighter.

“Now, this will in no way affect the decision made tomorrow, which I’m sure you can already guess at, what with your astounding performances,” Dumbledore went on happily. “I simply wished for you to know that I called a lovely friend of mine, Margaret, at the Conservatoire in London when I got your application. Isn’t it curious how she could not recall having you as a student?”

Harry shrank back, absolutely horrified. *Was what he’d done a criminal offence?* He held onto Tom a bit harder, breathing short.

“Now,” he said, holding a hand up, “do not be mistaken, Harry, I am not here to admonish you—it is more of a commendation, in fact. Few would go to such lengths to achieve their dream, and by doing so you caught my eye. Your talent was beyond your years, and sometimes to get that recognised, it is necessary to take unconventional paths.”

“Professor, I—” Harry started but it fell flat —*I can explain*? —*it’s not how it looks*? It felt ridiculous to try and find excuses, or worse, *lie*.

“It can be our little secret, Harry,” Dumbledore said happily enough. “It is true, without that specific accomplishment, your application would have never landed on my desk. However, rest assured, the application has been modified, there is no record of it anywhere. It is simply our secret.”

“Are you serious?” Harry asked, panicked and breathless.

“Yes,” Dumbledore said easily. “Well done for surpassing all of my expectations this year.”

Harry, at a loss as he looked at Dumbledore, turned to Tom instead, who looked a bit pale but otherwise fine, donning a reassuring smile.

“Thank you,” he said finally, shoulders sagging in relief.

Dumbledore waved him off, smiling lightly. “You should get back to the party, boys. I’m sure many people are excited to speak with you. That reminds me,” he said, frowning, “I have someone here tonight who is interested in producing your play—would you come and speak with them?”

Tom blinked slowly, looking like he couldn’t handle many more shocks. “Yes,” he said eventually, “of course. I’ll have to get the others.”

“Yes, I will wait for you inside,” Dumbledore said happily, making to set off. He turned back at the last second though, and said, “One last thing boys—” he looked at them, no longer that easy twinkle in his eye and smile on his lips, but something almost regretful— “there will come times where you will have success, power, money presented to you. In those instances, above all, choose love. This may seem odd, but take it from an old man who has lived through more than you can imagine: choose love. There is nothing more important, at the end of all things.”

With those last words, he went back to the Great Hall, the chatter spilling out into the entrance as he opened the doors and slipped inside.

"*What*?" Harry said after a stunned silence with Tom.

"Don't look at me," Tom said, eyes wide, "I'm still on the fucking Honour's thing."

Harry stared at him for a second, before he burst out laughing. Uncontrollable and unrestrained laughter. Tom joined in, shushing him as he himself laughed along.

"God," Harry said, wiping at the corner of his eyes, "you're a fucking Honour's student, I'm not going to prison for whatever the fuck, and we're supposed to choose love? I guess?"

Tom huffed a breath, his cheeks still red with laughter. "I promise you," he said earnestly, despite his amused grin, "I will always choose you."

Harry sobered up a bit, rolling his eyes. "Don't make promises you can't keep," he said quietly, pressing a kiss to his knuckles.

"I mean it," Tom pressed, leaning closer. "I understood tonight that having you, it's not a hindrance, or an obsession that gets in the way. I played better tonight than I ever have before, just because I was with you."

Harry smiled, almost sadly. "There will come a day," he said quietly, "where I *will* be in the way."

"Nothing's important enough for you to get in the way."

"Tom," Harry said seriously, "just—don't make promises you can't keep, okay?"

Tom frowned, head tilting to the side in confusion. "Do you plan on not choosing me?"

"Of course not," Harry said, conviction strong. He was sure of it, he'd always—*always*—choose love. That was just who he was. Nothing was more important to him than love—family.

"Then why do you seem so sure that I won't?"

"Just—" Harry said, heaving a breath. "Let's talk about it later, okay? We do really have to get back inside."

Tom's frown deepened for a second before he nodded. "Okay," he said slowly, pushing off the wall. He bent down and kissed Harry again, slow, lingering, a chaste press of lips. "Later."

"Yes, later," Harry assured, "come on."

As they entered the Great Hall, they came across a father and his daughter, who Harry immediately recognised from the Italian restaurant, from New Year's Eve—which Harry thought of more as *Tom's birthday*, nowadays.

"Oh!" Mark said, eyes lighting up. "I was just hoping we'd bump into you two."

“Mark,” Harry said happily, “and this must be Rose,” he added, crouching down to the girl’s level and holding out a hand.

She giggled as she shook his hand, doing that thing kid’s did when they were shy; fingers in the mouth, legs twisting. “Hello,” she said, giggling. “You’re pretty, like a princess.”

“Oh wow,” Harry said, laughing, “thank you, that’s so nice! Especially coming from a *real* princess, wow!”

It took a second for her to understand, but when she did she giggled brightly, holding onto his fingers.

“How did you like the play?” Harry asked, the question for both of them as he straightened out, Rose still clinging to his fingers.

“Fantastic,” Mark said brightly, “you *wrote* that?”

“Well, Tom wrote the majority of it,” Harry said, defecting to him.

“I’m glad you liked it,” Tom said with a smile. “Were you here last night? Or just today?”

“Just today I’m afraid,” Mark said, smiling as he looked down at Rose playing with the rings on Harry’s fingers. “I promised her I wouldn’t come without her, and Rosie was with Nana last night, weren’t you, sunshine?”

“Yes,” she said. “I wanted to come and see the play though.”

“Well, you got to see it tonight, didn’t you?” Harry said.

She nodded happily. “It was really good! You were the Prince, and *you*,” she turned to look up at Tom, shying away for a second, closer to Harry, “you were the King.”

“Quite right,” Tom said. He turned to Harry who had crouched down again, and smiled as he did the same. “Who did you like best?” he asked patiently, and Harry’s heart might as well have beat out of his chest.

“Uhm,” she tapped her chin thoughtfully, making Harry laugh. “It was you,” she said to Harry, holding onto his hands.

“Me too,” Tom whispered conspiratorially. “He was definitely the prettiest, right?”

She nodded vehemently. “I really wish you got married instead,” she said sadly.

Tom huffed a laugh. “Me too,” he said, standing back up.

“I want to be just like you,” Rose said earnestly as she held onto Harry’s hands.

“Oh really?” he said, grinning. “Here,” he took off one of the rings from his middle finger and put it into her palm, “now you can be.”

She lit up, clasping it in her hand as if it was the most valuable treasure as she looked up at her dad, grinning broadly. “Look daddy,” she said eagerly as Mark whisked her up into his arms.

“That’s beautiful,” he said happily before turning back to them. “It was incredible, lads, really. Absolutely worth the wait, you both did a smashing job, as did all your friends.”

“Thank you,” Tom said with a small smile.

“We’ve got to go now ‘cause it's way past someone’s bedtime,” Rose giggled as he said it, burying into his chest, “but I’ll see you tomorrow won’t I?”

“Indeed,” Tom said, shaking his hand.

“Yes, tomorrow,” Harry said, a renewed sense of excitement thrumming through him at the prospect.

“Okay, have a good night, guys, bye bye!”

“Bye, Mark,” Harry called after him.

“First of all,” Tom said when he was gone, “how in the world did you recognise him? And how the actual *fuck* did you remember the girl’s name?”

Harry snorted, shrugging. “It just kind of came back to me, I dunno, honest. I’m as surprised as you are.”

“Christ,” Tom mumbled, laughing as he set an arm around his shoulders. “Come on, let’s go round those idiots up and go see Dumbledore, yeah?”

Harry took hold of his fingers, lacing his own with them. “Yeah, come on. Best grab a parent too, Sirius maybe? If there's gonna be a deal involved.”

“Shit yeah,” Tom said, setting off, “I have to check on Amelia too.”

“Maybe get another drink first?”

Tom took a sharp turn in the opposite direction, nodding wisely. “Good idea,” he said, smacking a kiss onto Harry’s head. “So smart.”

Harry laughed, leaning further into him.

—Scene nine—

That night Harry had a nightmare. Despite how tired he was after the party, and how peacefully he went to sleep in Tom's arms after they fell into bed together gasping and moaning—he still had a nightmare.

It was the graduation ceremony, the theatre distorted and confusing. There were people from his old theatre back home alongside him as well as the other boys, and, most surprisingly, beside Sirius and Remus, his parents were there cheering him on.

One by one the people got called up and Harry's anxiety only grew with every person that accepted their diploma. Some got distinctions, and when Tom was called up (before Harry for some reason) he was named the Honour's student for their year. He never made it up onto the stage, however, because he'd vanished, and was nowhere to be found.

When Harry was called up he wasn't handed a diploma; but was met with Dumbledore's eyes no longer holding their amiable twinkle, but a cold sternness. He was humiliated, in front of everyone present, as his cheating and lying was exposed.

He woke up with a jolt, breathing shallow, the image of his parents' disappointed faces swimming in front of him. Thankfully, Tom was there to pull him back down into the sheets, pressing a kiss to the shell of his ear and mumbling sleepy reassurances. As much as Harry relaxed in the moment, he didn't really get back to sleep, too anxious for what was to come.

The morning was spent happily enough, no one but Harry truly nervous for the ceremony. The others didn't understand *why* he seemed so nervous.

Theo clapped him on the back with an amused, "No need to be nervous now Harry, now we just reap the rewards of our hard work."

But it wasn't that easy, and no one but Tom *understood*. Though even he wasn't too concerned. To Harry's surprise, he seemed to *trust* Dumbledore, about this, anyway.

Harry felt sick as they were getting ready, and he resented the fact that they'd agreed to meet family and friends at the ceremony. He wished he could just pull Sirius aside and explain the whole thing, get his guidance on the matter.

Once they were seated in the theatre, chatter filling the space, Harry felt nauseous. A microphone was standing on the stage, in the centre, and their three Professors were beside it. Harry turned around anxiously to look the few rows behind him, at Sirius—but he only got an excited wave.

"Harry, it's going to be okay," Tom said quietly, holding onto his hand. "Stop worrying. There's no reason Dumbledore would do all this just to show you up now."

Harry took a panicked breath in, hand shaking in Tom's. "What if it is though?" A lot of students were present, and the school board was too. "What if it's all to—I don't know? Make an example out of me? You know, to say '*don't do what this idiot did*'."

Tom chuckled, shifting to look at him better. “You’re being paranoid.”

“Tom,” Harry said desperately, not understanding why he wasn’t taking this seriously.

“Harry,” he said, just on the edge of chastising. “Listen to me, you will be fine. The teachers love you, all of them. They wouldn’t do that to you.”

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Harry said, on the verge of a panic attack as he sank back into the seat.

Tom went to say something else, but cut himself off as Dumbledore tapped the microphone.

“Hello and welcome,” he said, his gravelly serene voice ringing out in the theatre. “Thank you all for coming to this year’s graduation ceremony for our young thespians. There are a few words I would like to say before commencing, if you do not mind me taking up a few minutes of your time.”

Harry was shaking, so sure his whole world was about to crumble around him at any moment as he listened to Dumbledore’s speech.

“It has truly been a pleasure for us Professors to accompany these seven students throughout their experience here at Hogwarts. There have rarely been students so devoted to their work, so creative, hard working, and insightful. It was a learning experience, not only for them, but for us too. These students showed a level of talent far beyond their years, without any exception, but their ability to work together and bring the best out of each other was truly what made their career here at school.

“The play we ask seventh years to write is to test their abilities in working together, without guidance from our part. It is to put their management skills and creativity to the test. While it is important to give a good performance, the quality of the play is not what we evaluate, and yet I feel the need to commend our students for the best play we have seen in years. It is the first time our dear producers in the West End, who keep our love for live theatre alive, have expressed interest in bringing our students’ play to their stages. And for that, I applaud the seven of you.”

The theatre filled up with polite applause, and some disbelieving murmuring. It was something Harry had barely had time to think about. They’d met with the producers last night, all of them, with Sirius there to work as a guide. Negotiations were discussed, offers produced…it was a lot to digest, and was something they would finalise once they were all back in London.

It was a dream come true, in all honesty, and Harry was sure none of them had truly realised the extent of it yet.

“Let us not forget, in the light of *Elio*, your phenomenal rendition of *Hamlet*, which we reserve to our most promising students. All of this to say that you have all performed outstandingly. No matter the challenge you were presented with, you always gave your very best, and we are sorry to see you go. You inspired not only us, but younger students as well.

Now," he clapped his hands together once, turning to look at the other Professors, "I do think we must get on with the handing out of diplomas."

While Dumbledore's speech had calmed Harry down somewhat, this announcement brought a new wave of anxiety over him, and he fidgeted in his seat, feeling sick to his stomach.

"To Gaspar Avery," Dumbledore said, taking the diploma from McGonagall while Gaspar rushed onto the stage after giving them a quick grin. When he was up on the stage, Dumbledore handed him the diploma with a kind smile. "For your perseverance, and most individual creativity, we have awarded you with the highest distinctions."

Harry let out a surprised laugh as Gaspar seemed to freeze. They all looked at each other, eyes wide with disbelief. The award system was highly subjective, but distinctions were handed out in different brackets, and very few students were awarded the highest. The only status above highest distinctions was an Honour's student, and if Harry wasn't mistaken, the theatre students had not had one in years.

"Thank you," Gaspar said, taking the diploma with shaky fingers as people applauded, Harry and the others the loudest in the whole room. He waved out to the audience before taking his seat on the stage.

"Next, Alphard Orion Black," Dumbledore called into the microphone. Alphard was grinning as he got up onto the stage. "For your brilliant performances and insightful commentary in class, we have awarded you with the highest distinctions."

"Oh my god." His voice carried into the microphone, making the audience laugh lightly. They all applauded him as he took his diploma and sat next to Gaspar who he hugged excitedly.

Dumbledore was smiling as he turned back to the microphone and said, "Richard Lestrange."

"My baby!" Lorraine shouted above the crowd as Rick made his way up.

"For your indomitable mindset and beautiful renditions of your characters, we have awarded you the highest distinctions."

Rick was grinning like Harry had never seen before, looking so *proud* as he waved out at them before joining Gaspar and Alphard, hugging them both.

"Looks like we're all getting the highest distinctions," Tom whispered as he leant into Harry's ear while Abraxas was being called up.

Harry gripped his hand tighter, doing his best to focus on his friends' celebrations and not think of his turn looming in the near distance.

Dumbledore handed Abraxas the diploma with a smile, saying, "For your level-headedness and unshakeable assiduity in everything you undertake, we have awarded you the highest distinctions."

“Thank you,” Abraxas said, colour high on his pale cheeks. He was biting his lip to tame the force of his grin as he waved out to his parents and to Theo, Harry, and Tom. He joined the others, accepting the accolades.

“Next is Theodore Nott,” Dumbledore said.

Theo had been fidgeting anxiously in his seat beside Harry, and he jumped up, squeezing his shoulder as he went past. He ambled up to the stage with forced coolness, and Harry smiled at the scene despite his inner turmoil.

“For your wicked spirit,” Dumbledore said, handing him the diploma, “and your inspiring values, we have awarded you the highest distinctions.”

Theo was buzzing as he took the diploma, eyes bright to match his grin as he bowed stupidly for the public, giving both Harry and Tom a thumbs up and saying, “Thank you so much,” into the microphone. He forced McGonagall into a fist bump, and positively tackled the other boys into an embrace, throwing himself over them.

Harry watched, a small smile on his face, until:

“Harry James Potter.”

His heart might as well have stopped, and he couldn’t move for a second. It was Sirius’s shout of, “Harry!” and Tom’s hand on his thigh, squeezing encouragingly, that got him to just bite the bullet.

He shuffled past Tom, and walked up to the stage slowly, feeling all eyes on him. He pushed his glasses up his nose awkwardly, breathing short and vision tunnelling a bit.

Dumbledore greeted him with a smile, though Harry couldn’t help but notice the way he was withholding the diploma.

“As most of you are aware, the school allowed an exception this past September,” he said into the microphone, and Harry felt faint. “Many did not agree with this decision on my part, for good reason, but I knew I could not be wrong about this. Harry, here, joined our company only this year, and yet it was his arrival that elevated our boys to their full potential. He was the missing piece that tied everyone together. He proved himself to be hard working, talented, and always willing to perfect his performance. And for that, Harry, we have decided to award you the highest distinctions.”

The applause barely even registered in his mind as he took the diploma with shaky fingers, swallowing. He was sure he was white as a sheet, feeling nauseous in a way he hadn’t ever before. It took another second to compute in his mind, but the following wave of relief knocked the breath out of him and his ears stopped ringing, the world coming back into focus.

Sirius was on his feet beside Remus, both of them clapping and whistling loudly, Ron and Hermione right by them. His friends’ parents were all clapping, looking at him with bright smiles. But it was Tom, still reclined back in his seat, but two fingers in each corner of his

mouth as he whistled louder than anyone in the room—even Sirius—that had a grin blooming on his face.

“Thank you,” he said, looking back at Dumbledore, a genuine smile on his face.

Dumbledore put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed as if to say, *‘Your secret’s safe with me.’*

Harry couldn’t believe he’d ever doubted him. He went towards the other boys, stopping by Professor Snape who gave him a small smile, squeezing his shoulder, looking almost *proud*. Harry’s heart was hammering, and he laughed as his friends swamped him in hugs, all bonking him on the head with their rolled up diplomas.

They finally settled down again, Harry still reeling at being both off the hook, and having been awarded *the highest distinctions*. He could’ve never hoped for better.

“Now,” Dumbledore said with an air of finality, “our last student, Tom Marvolo Riddle.”

Harry sat on the edge of his seat as he watched Tom come up to the stage; not a single trace of discomfort in his body as he walked under the eyes of everyone in the theatre.

“I am unsure if there has ever been a student more determined, sometimes so utterly ruthless, to have graced the halls of this school,” Dumbledore said, withholding the diploma like he had done for Harry. Tom smirked at his words, head held high. “Your journey through the years was inspiring to all, you let nothing get in your way; whether that be your age in the early years of school, or your disadvantage amongst your peers. You showed an astounding talent very early on, and your relentless hard work only added onto that. For that, and for everything you brought to this school, we have decided to award you the title of Honour’s student of your promotion.”

He handed him the diploma as some people in the audience gasped, while others, such as Amelia and Sirius, stood up and applauded loudly. Harry was clapping so hard his hands stung, and the others joined in after their stunned silence.

As the commotion died down, Dumbledore spoke again, “As you well know, it is a right of passage for an Honour’s student to make a speech,” before stepping back.

Tom stepped in front of the microphone after clearing his throat. Harry was watching him with what he was sure were stars in his eyes.

“While I understand that this is a prime exercise in improvisation, I do think it is slightly cruel to expect a speech from someone who has not prepared one,” he said, though his tone was light, joking, and it made people laugh, especially Harry who knew for a fact that he’d gone to sleep rehearsing a speech he was making up.

“I suppose I’m meant to thank the people who helped me get to where I am, and while I relied majoritarily on myself, it would be a disservice to overlook the people who did help me along the way,” he paused, shifting on his feet. “First, the person who actually made this all possible for me, Amelia Haynes, who has taken the time to travel all the way from

London to come and spend these last few days with me. Amelia actually spent the last of her paycheck to rent out the equipment needed to record my audition, as well as listened to me act out parts of plays I enjoyed reading. She really—she made it all possible, so thank you, I really appreciate it, more than you know."

Harry could just make out how Amelia had her hands over her mouth, her proud smile still breaking through as Sirius, who was sitting next to her, put an arm around her shoulders.

"Our Professors here are of course deserving of all our gratitude," Tom went on, gesturing to the teachers. "They shaped us into the actors we are today, and frankly there is no finer choice of mentor in my opinion. And, of course, I have to thank my classmates, and *friends*. Despite our different upbringings I never felt true animosity from the people on this stage, contrary to others we shared the stage with over the years. They are all truly talented and remarkable in their own right. And they are fundamentally better people than I am, because I know that they will simply be happy for me for being named Honour's student, though in their place I would've been *jealous*."

People laughed again, charmed by Tom's easy way with words. Harry was grinning, knowing that while he said it lightly, it was very true.

"I have to give a personal commendation to Theo, because he'll be mad at me if I don't, but also because he was my first friend, ever. Even before I realised it myself. He is infinitely kind, and patient, and has never been afraid to tell me when I am in the wrong, and to hold me accountable for it. I grew up in a place where friends did not exist, and yet I can say wholeheartedly there's no one in the world I would rather have as a best friend."

Theo had clasped Harry's hand in his during that part of the speech, lip wobbling, and Harry smiled at it.

"And finally," Tom said, taking a breath, "I would like to thank Harry, who unknowingly made me a better person. What Professor Dumbledore said about him couldn't be truer; he was wholly unexpected, barged in and messed up all my plans for the year, and yet I doubt I would be standing here before you giving this speech if he hadn't come along, and given me a reason to become *better*. So thank you, Harry. And thank you to all who have come today, and came to see our play over the last two nights. It has been such an honour to be given this position and these opportunities. Thank you."

He stepped back from the microphone and was applauded greatly. Theo jumped up into his arms as he came over to them and the audience laughed at the display.

Tom gave him a genuine smile as he pried himself away, colour high on his cheeks, and an unshakeable satisfaction clinging to him. Harry knew that this was extremely important for him, that he'd barely even *hoped* for the Honour's.

"Well done," Harry told him as he finally got to him. Tom grinned, wrapping him up in a hug, a kiss pressed into his hair. "You deserve it."

"I know," Tom said with a smirk, tapping Harry's nose with the tip of his finger, "and I told you you'd be fine."

Harry grinned, leaning into him again, arms around his waist.

As the chatter died down, Dumbledore stepped back up to the microphone, and they all sat in their respective seats, diplomas held securely in their hands.

“That concludes this school year,” he said solemnly, “on Tom’s lovely speech. We wish you all the best in your future endeavours boys, you have made us more than proud.” With that, he started a last round of applause for them, and Harry didn’t know if it was devastation or elation that he felt.

This was it, the end, but also the undeniable beginning of something else.

—Scene ten—

The rest of the day was quite emotional. The assembly of parents and friends left them for a couple of hours while they went for a drink in the village, wanting to let them pack their things on their own. All except Amelia who hung back, wanting to spend the time with Tom.

They'd all be leaving at the same time; Sirius, Remus, Ron, Hermione, and Amelia together, and everyone else with their families, except Alphard who would be driving back with Rick who had his car at the school. Harry and Tom would leave the next morning with Harry's car.

"Best tackle the cleaning, yeah?" Rick said, looking around almost wistfully at the library.

"We'll do our rooms first and then do the rest of the space," Theo said.

"I can help, maybe mop the floor or something while you do your rooms?" Amelia proposed.

Tom scoffed, stubbing his cigarette out in the ashtray. "Amelia, your job is literally to clean up after kids. You're on holiday, don't even think about it."

"Are we doing our room?" Harry asked. "Seeing as though we're not leaving 'til tomorrow."

"We might as well," Tom said, shrugging. "We'll be leaving early tomorrow, right? Best if we do it now."

"Yeah, I suppose."

They'd said their goodbyes to their Professors after the graduation ceremony, regrouping in the chapel briefly to organise the afternoon. Their families had all been very vocally proud, congratulating them all many times.

["If you're ever down South, come and have a cuppa or something," Harry said to Snape, working up the courage to do so in a few quiet seconds amidst the chaos.

Snape had been more than surprised, but Harry knew how to discern his little smiles. "Why not."

"You can even come 'round for Christmas," Harry said, giving him a genuine smile, "like old times."

"We'll see, Potter," Snape said, but there was no hiding how pleased he was with the offer.]

Amelia followed Tom and him up into their room, and Harry was dreadfully embarrassed at the state of it. His bed was still in complete and utter disarray, and Tom's bed was well on its way to being the same. Their desks were both horrendously cluttered with books, the exact same ones for the most part, and their wardrobes were wide open, clothes on the floor by the door after the rush they'd left in that morning.

Amelia sighed as she saw it. "Teenage boys," she said, defeated. "You're all the same."

Harry groaned, hanging his head. “You know what? I’m just gonna throw my sheets in the washer, yeah?”

“Yep, good idea,” Tom said, a blush high on his cheeks. Harry saw why when he watched him try to inconspicuously pick up the tissues strewn around the floor by their beds, as well as the bottle of lube that definitely wasn’t hidden.

“Gosh Tom no need to look so embarrassed,” Amelia said with a laugh, “I’ve seen it all before you know.”

Harry pulled all his sheets off the bed and went downstairs to give them a wash before going back upstairs and setting his bed right. He wouldn’t be using it again, anyway, so he might as well.

“What do you say to sharing bags?” he asked Tom who was sitting on the floor with Amelia, sorting through his books. “Mine for clothes, yours for books.”

“Sounds good,” Tom said happily.

“I remember packing you up for that first day of school,” Amelia said wistfully as she held on to one of Tom’s books. “Gosh I was so worried, you’ve no idea. Sending you off on that train like that.”

“It all worked out though, didn’t it?” Tom said.

“Yeah,” she said, packing the book in her hands with the others. “Thank you, for giving me a ring,” she said seriously, voice quiet as she patted his hand gently. “I’m really happy I could come.”

Tom smiled. “You’ve got Harry to thank. It was his idea.”

Amelia looked over at Harry, where he was sorting through his own books. “I know,” she said, smiling at him, “thank you, Harry.”

“No problem,” he said happily. “I’ll make sure Tom rings from time to time, and he comes to see you sometimes—”

“If you think for even a second that I’m setting foot in that god awful place again, you’re dreadfully wrong, Potter—”

“Right,” Harry said, rolling his eyes at Amelia who laughed, “I’ll make sure we see each other from time to time, get you our number and stuff. And Tom will make sure you get all of the magazines he’s in, and that you get to see his films and whatever he plays in.”

“Oh that would be more than lovely,” she said brightly.

Harry smiled, going back to his packing. He listened to Amelia and Tom’s small chatter as they sorted through Tom’s things, smiling at the stories Amelia told.

“Oh, you’ll never believe who I caught with their hands down each other’s pants,” she said at some point, and Harry laughed.

Tom stopped what he was doing, looking at her. “Who?” he asked curiously.

“Bradley and Todd,” she said, shaking her head.

“You’re kidding?” Tom said, more invested than Harry would have thought.

She shook her head. “I swear! It was over a year ago now, probably just after you turned eighteen because they were a couple months younger than you, and they left not long after. I caught them in their room—my mistake to be honest, though I did knock.”

“I can’t believe this,” Tom said with a huff. “Bradley and Todd liked to think of themselves as some kind of gangsters but honestly they were playground bullies,” he said, keying Harry in. “Run of the mill, ultra homophobic, racist, the lot.”

“Christ,” Harry said with a laugh as he folded one of Tom’s t-shirts. “But you know, it’s always those ones. Those kinds of kids tried to bully me in school ‘cause I was pretty openly into boys, and I did theatre, you know? Easy target. But once I beat a few of them up for coming after me, with Ron of course—he broke a kid’s nose once, anyway—guess what?”

“They wanted to fuck you,” Tom guessed with a lopsided grin.

“Exactly!” Harry said. “All gay, the lot of them, can you believe that? None of them openly, mind.”

“What did you do? Did you tell the rest of the school?” Tom asked.

“No, no,” Harry said, frowning. “No, I’d never do that. I just kind of kept it to myself, I never said yes, anyway.”

“That’s nice of you, Harry,” Amelia said, looking up at him with a smile.

Harry shrugged, suddenly shy. “It was only right.”

They got all of their things packed, aside from their outfits for their restaurant date, and some comfy clothes for the drive in the morning. When that was done, Harry vacuumed the fluffy blue carpet while Tom dusted the shelves and nightstand.

“We’ll throw my sheets in the wash basket with the others’ tomorrow morning, yeah?” Tom said when they’d finished, the room looking pristine.

“Yep,” Harry replied.

They joined up with the others who were all finishing up.

“Er—let’s see,” Theo said, blowing his cheeks up in thought. “I’d say, Alphard, you vac the hallway up here, Harry and Tom you two do the bathroom, Rick and Gaspar the kitchen, I’ll mop the floor downstairs, and Abraxas you dust in the library, how’s that?”

“Sounds great,” Alphard said happily. “I’ll help in the kitchen when I’m done.”

They got to it, Harry cleaning up the shower while Tom looked after the sink, chatting with Amelia who hovered in the doorway as they went—Tom refused to let her help.

It took longer than Harry would’ve thought, and he ended up sweating so much he just tugged his t-shirt off, which led to at least five minutes of Tom not actually doing any cleaning as he just watched him, until Amelia called him out on it.

She clicked her fingers in front of his face, laughing as she said, “You have not been listening to me since Harry took his t-shirt off.”

Harry spun around, and grinned at Tom when he saw the flustered look on his face. He winked at him before getting back to scrubbing the glass.

It didn’t take that long in the end, Tom was quickly done with the sink and cleaned the floor while Harry was still doing the shower. When they’d finished they joined the others downstairs. Tom helped Abraxas finish up the dusting, and Harry—still shirtless much to seemingly everyone’s pleasure—took over the mopping from Theo who was *wheezing* by that time.

“Okay, I think that’s it for the kitchen,” Rick said as they got back into the library. “I cleaned the coffee machine, so just give it a quick do-over tomorrow morning after your coffee,” he said to Harry and Tom. “And all that’ll be left to do will be to clean any glasses left.”

“Are we having a quick drink?” Theo said, taking the mop and bucket from Harry who had finished by that point to clean it up.

“Yeah,” Alphard said, getting the bottle of whiskey, “for old times’ sake.”

“Barely any for me, Alphie,” Rick said, holding up his fingers to show how much he wanted. “Only enough to cheer, ‘cause I’m driving.”

“Would you like some, Amelia?” Alphard asked.

“Maybe just a tad,” she said, taking a seat. “You boys have done a great job with the cleaning, it looks brilliant.”

“Thank you,” Gaspar said happily. “There’s some bits of snacks on the kitchen counter, I suggest we all take what we want.”

“We’ll take some for the drive, yeah, Alphie?” Rick said.

“Sounds good,” he replied, filling up everyone’s glasses.

“Okay, who’s toasting?” Theo asked as he came back in.

“You, go on,” Tom said, lighting a cigarette. “I know you’re dying to.”

“Yeah you’re right,” Theo said excitedly as he stood up and held his drink up. The rest of them followed his lead, even though Harry’s legs were aching from the cleaning. Theo cleared his throat. “May our spirits live on in this chapel, and the memories we made in it live on within us. To friendship, theatre, and love. Cheers boys.”

They clinked their glasses together and knocked them back, the whiskey burning its way down Harry’s throat as he swallowed.

It was quiet once they’d set their glasses on the table and sat back down. Harry looked around, heart giving a sad pang in his chest as he noticed Abraxas’s missing chess board, the straightened out books on the third shelf on the nearest bookshelf—they’d been knocked over months ago and never set right. Gaspar’s sheet music was missing from one of the sofas. Their relatives’ phone numbers had been taken down from the wall around the phone.

“I can’t believe it’s over,” Alphard said quietly, a frown pinching his brows together.

They all hummed, a melancholy settling over them that they didn’t have words for. The sunlight shone through the stained glass, casting the room in a pink glow. Dust particles danced in the light, and it felt a lot like the end.

The others came back not longer after they’d finished cleaning, and it was officially time to say goodbye. Harry hugged Ron and Hermione, and Sirius and Remus, but he’d be seeing them very soon so he simply wished them a safe journey home. He watched, a small smile on his face, as Tom shook their hands amicably.

When it came time to say goodbye to the other boys they all hugged each other, promising to keep in touch and to see one another soon. There was only Alphard who Harry knew he would be seeing again very soon, and he just hoped they would keep their promises of staying friends with everyone else.

When the door finally clicked shut, and it was just Harry and Tom left in the eerily silent and clean chapel, Harry sighed.

Tom put an arm around his shoulders, holding him tight. “Don’t be sad,” he said quietly into his hair, pressing a kiss there. “You’ll see them all again soon.”

“I know,” Harry said, turning to hug him properly, “but I don’t like saying goodbye. It always feels so definite.”

“I understand,” Tom murmured. He wrapped his arms tight around Harry’s shoulders and rocked him from side to side with increasing force, until Harry laughed and he stopped with a smile.

“What do you want to do then?” Harry asked, the residual laughter shining through his voice. The melancholy started dripping away as the realisation that he and Tom were alone sunk in.

“I don’t know,” Tom said, a grin spreading across his lips as he looked down at Harry. “Theo left me a little present though.”

“Oh?” Harry said, interested. He already knew what Theo’s ‘little presents’ usually entailed.

“Yep, want to get high and lounge about?”

Harry laughed softly. “I would love to.”

*

Hours later they were sharing a sofa in the library, and Harry was poking his feet into Tom’s face on the other side of it.

“Stop it,” Tom said—*again*—as he grabbed Harry’s foot and held it down.

Harry giggled, wiggling his toes. They had their reservation in the restaurant at seven, and it was already six, though neither of them was too keen on keeping track of time. They’d smoked at least three joints, Harry wasn’t too sure on the exact number, and he was quite high, if his unstoppable giggles were anything to go by.

Tom’s eyes were droopy and red, going with the flush on his cheeks. Despite his unwillingness to be, he was giggly too, and kept breaking into fits of uncontrollable laughter anytime Harry tried to say anything. There had never been a sound that captured Harry’s heart quite like Tom’s laughter did.

“We need to start getting ready,” Harry murmured some time later, when Tom had gotten distracted and started tracing his fingers along Harry’s ankle gently.

He hummed, eyes glassy and unfocused, his blinks slow.

“You’re absolutely high off your arse, aren’t you?” Harry remarked.

Tom burst into laughter again, rich, deep, music to Harry’s ears. “A bit yeah,” he admitted once he’d calmed down. He rubbed a hand down his face, chuckling to himself. “But we do need to get ready like—immediately.”

“We only need to get dressed,” Harry said, laughing at the urgency in Tom’s voice.

Tom levelled him with a disapproving look. “Harry we’re going on a date, at least have a shower, Jesus. You’ve been sweating all day.”

Harry rolled his eyes. He was actually still shirtless because he’d sweat through his t-shirt, so maybe Tom had a point. “We’ll just have one together, save time.”

Tom cocked an eyebrow. “I feel like that might take *more* time.”

“Well,” Harry said, sitting up and putting his hands on Tom’s thighs, “you’ll just have to keep your hands to yourself, Riddle. Hope that won’t be too hard for you.”

“Yeah?” Tom said, eyeing him with a challenge in his eyes. “So will you, Potter.”

Harry narrowed his eyes thinking, *yeah he got me there*. Nevertheless, he stuck his chin up and said, “No problem,” before getting up—on dreadfully unsteady feet—and pushing his trousers off as he went to the stairs. His boxers he shed on the landing, looking down at Tom as he provocatively added, “Coming?”

They obviously ended up snogging in the shower, but the water had sobered them up a bit and they both realised how late they were going to be if they didn’t hurry up. They were starving too, which made the prospect of a lovely meal in a restaurant all the more appealing.

“You’re gonna give me blue balls,” Harry complained when they decided they *wouldn’t* be having sex under the shower. He was actively fighting the urge to just tug one off right there as he washed his hair.

Tom laughed, biting his kiss swollen bottom lip as he rinsed off. “Promise when we get back I’ll look after you properly.”

“I’m just gonna be horny all night now,” Harry grumbled, sticking his head under the spray of water to take his mind off his cock.

“Good,” Tom said, grinning, “that’s how I like you.”

“Yeah, horny, not sexually frustrated.”

“Isn’t sexually frustrated how you were before we got together?” Tom teased. “Because I quite liked you then too.”

Harry groaned, splashing some water at him. “No, because at least I wanked before.”

“Oh, please, go ahead, I’m not stopping you.”

Harry groaned again, cock twitching. “Shut up, shut up. I hate you.”

“You *love* me,” Tom teased happily.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yes, which is why I’m getting ready to go on a date with you instead of submitting to my primal urge to cum.”

“You’re so dramatic,” Tom said, laughing. “It’s delayed gratification. You’ll feel even better later. Be patient.”

“Piss off,” Harry grumbled, for lack of a better comeback, which just made Tom laugh again.

Once they were out of the shower they dried off and got dressed; Tom looked as smart as ever with his light button down shirt and his slacks. Harry went more summery with a loose linen white shirt and some light black trousers. He still had the waist chain Luna had given him, clasped around his waist under the shirt, but that was the only piece of jewellery he retained.

When they were ready (and Tom had spent fifteen minutes combing his hair back) they got their shoes on. Before they could step out of the door though, Tom stopped short and turned towards Harry.

“What is it? Did you forget something?”

“Empty your pockets,” he said, reminding Harry quite acutely of Tom’s birthday when he’d made the same demand in the freezing cold of the empty street.

“Are you mugging me?” Harry asked, laughing.

Tom rolled his eyes. “Just do it.”

“Alright,” Harry said, unsure as he pulled out his wallet. “That’s all I’ve got.”

“Okay, put it on the table,” Tom instructed.

“Why?”

“You’re not paying tonight, I’m not taking the risk of you offering,” Tom stated, crossing his arms. “I’m taking you out.”

“*Tom*,” Harry groaned, hanging his head. “We can do half and half if you want.”

“No, put your wallet on the table and leave it there.”

“What if I need my ID?”

“Harry we’re going to the village not fucking Vegas.”

Harry huffed, dropping his wallet on the table. “Fine,” he said.

“Very good,” Tom said happily, holding a hand out which Harry took begrudgingly. He locked the door behind them once they were out in the breezy summer air, still holding Harry’s hand, before they set off.

The walk over was lovely. The sun was still high in the sky though it was beginning its slow descent, Harry hoped they might catch the sunset as they left. They held hands, the summer breeze washing over them as they walked, chatting about what they wanted to eat—the munchies were still eating away at their stomachs and they were dying to eat some good food.

“Wait here,” Tom said as they got to the main alley in the village, the restaurant just a few shops down from them.

“What?” Harry said, confused, but Tom had already run off. He assumed he was going to buy cigarettes, because they were next to the flower shop, which was next to the newsagents where you could buy cigarettes, and he actually hadn’t seen which Tom disappeared into.

He waited, stomach rumbling, as he admired the pretty cobbled path. The smell from the florist filled his nose, matching the hangings of all the rustic buildings filled with pretty flowers.

Just as he was about to go into the newsagents to ask what was taking so long, Tom emerged, not from that storefront, but from the *florist's*. Harry stopped short, his, '*what the fuck took so long?*' dying on his tongue. He had a little purple flower in hand, and a single red rose. Harry stared at him, jaw somewhere on the floor, as he walked up with a bashful little smile and rosy cheeks.

"What?" he mumbled incoherently.

"Sorry that took so long," Tom said, ducking his head, grinning. "I wanted to get you something bigger but I thought it would be quite inconvenient in the restaurant and for travelling."

Harry just stared at him, dumbfounded.

Tom cleared his throat when Harry didn't reply and handed him the rose. "A red rose, obvious significance, I should think," he said, making sure Harry was holding onto the stalk. "And," he held up the little bundle of pale flowers, "purple lilac, for the beginning of love." He leant forward and tucked the little flowers behind Harry's ear, smiling as he stepped back and looked at him.

"You got me flowers?" Harry asked, a bit disbelieving. He felt oddly choked up, as if he might cry. Tom had got him *flowers*.

"Yes," Tom said, easy as anything, charming smile in place. "You look beautiful."

I'm going to marry you, Harry thought wildly. When nothing else came to mind, he resorted to his first thought and said, aloud, "I'm going to marry you."

Tom laughed, surprised, genuine delight blooming in his eyes. "Well, I'd be honoured," he said once he'd recovered from Harry's blurting of the confession.

"I—" Harry looked down at the rose, shaking his head in his stupor. "I can't believe you got me flowers." He was making a big deal out of it—but it *was*. No one had ever got him flowers, he'd never expected anyone to *ever* get him flowers.

"Are you happy?" Tom asked, bending down to catch Harry's eye. He was grinning, he knew the answer.

"Yes," Harry said, laughing in disbelief. "God, yes."

"Good," Tom said, furtively stealing a kiss that left Harry breathless despite it being a quick press of lips. He held out an arm and said, "Shall we?"

Harry was looking at him as if he'd never seen him before—and frankly, he might have been. If he was in love before, this was a whole new depth to it.

He took Tom's arm, looping his beneath it, whilst he held the rose in his other hand, and they walked arm in arm over to the restaurant.

The awning was pulled out over the establishment, the name of it written in white over a deep red colour. The flowers potted outside were in full bloom, and some tables and chairs were even set up outside in an impromptu terrace. People were sitting around them, drinking glasses of wine. They looked over at them, looked away again, and then did a double take, staring at them more intently.

Harry almost frowned at them, until a woman smiled and said, “I love the flower,” pointing to her own ear.

Harry smiled, laughing lightly as he felt a blush creep up his cheeks. “Thank you,” he said quietly, as Tom ushered him through the open door.

They were greeted by the hostess, the same one from Tom’s birthday, and seated in the back of the restaurant. It was more luminous than last time, the rich red decor illuminated by the light pouring in from outside, the fairy lights above twinkling softly.

Harry set the rose on the table as they sat down and the hostess handed them their menus before leaving them alone. There were other people in the restaurant, an elderly couple, a mother and her two children, and a young couple.

They chatted pleasantly, about the food, the restaurant, how they felt about the year ending. Harry was still elated by the flowers, leaning on the table to be closer to Tom, feeling lovesick.

The hostess came over with a bottle of wine they had not ordered and an amused grin. When they looked at her, puzzled, Harry on the brink of saying she must be mistaken, she set the bottle on the table and said, “This is from a certain Theo—” Tom groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose— “he added on a note that reads ‘*An apology for all the times I told you to have sex with each other. It was sometimes an invasion of privacy. Enjoy the wine, and enjoy the date. Love you*.’”

To the hostess’s credit, she didn’t stutter while reading the frankly ridiculous note, only laughed when she’d finished.

“Oh God,” Harry said, face burning. “Sorry—for that.”

She smiled, uncorking the bottle which, by the looks of it, was the most expensive one on their wine menu. “It’s no problem, I couldn’t wait to bring it. I've been laughing over that note since the boy asked me to write it down!”

“When…?” Harry said, looking at Tom in confusion.

“Yesterday,” Tom replied, exasperated. “I came to make the reservation yesterday, with Theo, he must have run back in when I went next door to buy cigarettes.”

“Idiot,” Harry said, rolling his eyes through his fond smile. “Thank you, anyway,” he added, turning to the hostess who had filled up their glasses.

“You’re very welcome. Have you boys chosen what you’d like?”

They gave their orders, which they'd decided on strategically so as to share, because, as usual, Tom couldn't pick what he wanted.

Picking his glass up, Tom gave Harry a devastating smile, and said, "Cheers?"

Harry laughed, lifting his own glass and clinking it with his, "To our first date."

Tom was smiling as he took a sip, and Harry matched it with one of his own. He couldn't get over how *happy* Tom seemed since they'd gotten together. It was mind blowing to him that he could ever make someone so happy just by being with them.

"What's that frown for?" Tom asked, head tilted to the side.

Harry blinked, not realising he'd been frowning. But he knew what it was for—the discussion they'd cut short last night, just before they'd gone back into the Great Hall. Tom's happiness, his *love*—Harry couldn't help but think that it was conditional, that it might have a deadline. The clock was ticking and he didn't know when the alarm would go off.

"Sorry," he said, shaking his head. The flowers were in his peripheral vision, and he smiled as he pushed his glasses back up his nose. "The wine's a bit sour, must've made me frown."

Tom's brow pinched. "Are you lying to me? You look like you're lying. You're a terrible liar, you know."

Harry huffed a small laugh, face scrunching up in discomfort. "I just—I was thinking about the conversation we had last night, during the party."

"The one outside the Great Hall?" Tom said, much more serious than he had been.

Harry hummed, crossing and uncrossing his knife and fork nervously.

"Okay," Tom said, looking to be collecting his thoughts as he sat up straighter. "Communicating isn't always my forté, but we can try it out. What—what is it that's bothering you?"

Harry's face was burning. He was so bad at being open and honest about his feelings—but he couldn't deny that Tom, who was usually equally as bad as him, was at least *trying*. He cleared his throat, shifting in his seat. "I—Remember in Snape's class, first term, when you said you obsess over sometimes futile things? That get in the way of what's really important to you?"

"As much as I wish I could forget that, I do remember, yes. Why?"

They were both a bit defensive, Harry wouldn't look him in the eye and Tom was sitting with his arms crossed. Taking a deep breath, Harry pushed on, "Well, I think that maybe—maybe that's how you feel about me?" He said it haltingly, unsure. He didn't want to be accusatory, but it came across that way.

"Sorry?" Tom said, and it would've only been more ridiculous if he'd said '*pardon?*' "You think that by committing to being in a relationship with you I'm giving into my futile

obsessions?"

Harry cringed. "Well—when you put it like that it sounds stupid. I just—what I mean to say is that I expect you to cast me aside whenever something more exciting comes along, career-wise for example. And—I don't know how to feel about that."

"Harry—what?" Tom said, looking more confused than anything else.

Harry sighed, leaning with an elbow on the table, scratching a hand through his hair. "Look—I—maybe I'm wrong, but you did say that I wasn't *worth* it—"

"No, *you* said that, not me."

"Tom," Harry said, trying to keep his voice down, "it's what you meant."

"No I didn't," Tom said, sitting back in his chair; defensive, frown pinching his brows together.

"What did you mean then?" Harry tried. "That's how I took it. You did agree that I was a '*distraction*' from '*what was really important'*."

It was Tom's turn to cringe, nose scrunching up. It was silent for a moment, the weight of it weighing over them. "I know what that sounds like," he said eventually, "*but*, please remember that I wasn't quite in my right mind when I agreed to that."

Harry cocked an eyebrow, clear that he wasn't satisfied with the excuse. "What about the bullshit about you not being able to treat me right without jeopardising your career?"

"Okay," Tom said, rubbing his forehead with his thumb. When he looked back at Harry, his eyes were softer, less defensive. "I know I have a lot to atone for, when it comes to you. Which is why I'm trying to—you know—take you on dates and buy you flowers. I want to prove to you that I can and I will treat you right, regardless of my career."

"But Tom," Harry said gently, reaching over the table to touch his fingers with his own, "how do I know that? I trust that you'll treat me right, my question is for how long? What will you do when you get a big opportunity and have to move to a different country for months? Or when you can't make time to come home because you're so busy between photoshoots and interviews? This is what I mean."

"I—" he cut himself off, looking both lost and apologetic.

Harry took a shaky breath, letting Tom fit their fingers together. "Going by what you've said to me in the past—from your legitimate excuses to not be with me—how am I to know that you've changed your mind? What has changed?"

Tom leant closer. "I meant what I said the other night," he whispered, "I realised that what I felt for you was far beyond attraction, and that I couldn't give you up, no matter the price. If you want the whole truth I regretted stopping in May—instantly, as soon as you left I felt awful. I panicked, I don't know why, maybe I thought things were going too fast—I don't

know. I didn't just want to hook up, but I hadn't yet realised that and—it was all very confusing, and I'm sorry that you got hurt because I didn't know what I wanted."

He sighed, looking down at the table as he held onto Harry's hand a bit tighter. "As to what I said later that night I—I was terrified. I didn't—I retreated back to the comfort and safety of having your friendship. It was a panic response, really. I was so scared of losing you, more scared than of hurting you, to be honest. And I'm sorry for it, you deserve more than that, someone less selfish. But you know, more than anyone, who I am, so I hope you'll understand that at least."

"I convinced myself everything was fine after that but even I'd hurt myself in the process. I hated the distance between us, I hated that despite it all I *had* lost you. And I think it took losing you to realise exactly why I couldn't fathom it." He licked over his lips, pausing. "I'm really sorry, I was confused, and I didn't know what was important to me anymore, or what I wanted. I hurt you in the process and I'm really sorry for it."

Moved, Harry took a shaky breath, biting into his bottom lip as the echo of the heartache resonated in his chest. Tom really had hurt him, and he was stupid to think he could forgive and forget so easily.

Just as he was about to speak though, their food arrived, and they sprang apart. The restaurant came back into focus, the inane chatter surrounding them ringing in Harry's ears for a second. He forced himself to thank the waiter, eyes not meeting Tom's.

There was a bout of silence between them, neither of them commenting on the food in front of them or going to eat any.

Eventually, Harry said, "I can forgive you for that, as long as I can trust you to not do it again. Because, Tom, I mean this," he took his hand again and caught his eye, "I'm all in. If we're in a relationship and you're my boyfriend, you will always take precedence. I will always value you more than a role, or an award, or an interview, or whatever. While I will work for myself, I will always come home to *you*. And if that scares you, you have to say so before—well, just say so now."

Tom was quiet for a moment, just looking at him as their plates steamed between them. His eyes were wide, apprehensive, and he did look a bit scared. Harry braced himself for the worst.

"Okay," he ended up saying in a whisper, and Harry's heart sped up. "I—I'm still struggling to *adapt* to this new…thing," he was stuttering over the words, so different from his usual casually confident tone. "It's always been just me, my interests above everything else. So this is very—different. For me. But I would love that—I would love to be that for you. I really would, and I hope you'll believe me when I say that I will try my best to remain true to that—that home will always be with you, and that I will have you in mind during every decision in my career."

Harry almost sobbed. The breath left him in an almost painful exhale, relief making him shiver.

“It’s always just been me,” he repeated earnestly, looking Harry in the eye. “I thought it would always be *just me*. I have a virulent hate for everything and everyone that isn’t *me*, and it’s absurd to who I was before I met you that I would ever choose *love*, of all things, over potentially myself.” He smiled lighty, a vulnerability and sincerity in his eyes that Harry took comfort in. He squeezed his hand lightly and added, “*When I had mastered the art of hatred, somebody started loving me*.”

Harry, though quite choked up, eyes glassy with tears fighting to drip over his waterline, laughed. It was a happy sound, and he wiped at his eyes quickly as he said, “Are you quoting Shakespeare at me?”

After a beat, Tom laughed too, bashful but secretly happy. “I should’ve known you’d catch onto that,” he said, looking at Harry with an adoration that made him feel giddy, “smart as you are.”

Harry smiled, head tilting to the side with fondness, the purple of the flowers catching in his line of sight again. *Beginning of love*, Tom had said. Harry’s heart beat against his ribs, seemingly spelling out Tom’s name in its rhythm. “I love you,” he said quietly.

Tom smiled fondly, picking up his hand and pressing a kiss to his knuckles. “I love you too,” he whispered. “I hope you believe me?”

It was framed as a question, looking for reassurance, and Harry found it endearing. He nodded. “I do,” he affirmed. “I trust you.”

“Good,” Tom said happily, obviously pleased to have nailed the ‘*communication*’. It was cute. “Shall we eat now? I’m starving.”

“Yes please,” Harry said eagerly, picking up his knife and fork.

The tense atmosphere lifted immediately, and they enjoyed their food, and the rest of their date. They shared what they’d both ordered and everything was delicious. When they finished eating they chatted, like they always did, never running out of things to say, and drank their wine.

When dessert came, Harry laughed delightedly. Tom had asked Mark personally to make treacle tart, Harry’s favourite dessert. He teased him afterwards, for stealing his idea. When they’d finished their meal, Mark came out and insisted on scoring the dessert off their bill, telling them all about how Rosie had told her mum about the play in huge detail instead of going to bed.

“You’ve become her idol,” he’d said to Harry, who had laughed, happy he’d made such an impression on the girl.

When they left, unsteady on their feet from the wine, Harry’s wish was granted, and they were accompanied by the setting sun. It cast the cobbled street in an ethereal sort of orange glow, the pink sky beautiful on the horizon.

“You know,” Harry said as they walked hand in hand, coming to a stop under a lamppost, “I really thought you were gonna kiss me here on your birthday.”

Tom stopped beside him, eyebrows raised in surprise, before a thoughtful look took over. Soft, as he stepped closer and took Harry’s face in his hand. “I think I meant to,” he murmured.

“Are you gonna kiss me now?” he asked in a whisper, tilting his chin up, looking up at him through his lashes.

“Yeah,” Tom said breathlessly, leaning down and kissing him in the middle of the street.

The only word Harry could come up with to qualify it was *magical*. The sun was setting, the air was fresh, his stomach was full, and he was loved. What more could he ever want?

When they pulled away they were rosy cheeked and giggling, leaning into each other as they made it the rest of the way back to the chapel.

Barely over the threshold, Tom was kissing him again, more insistently, pressing him up against the closed door. They didn’t even make it up to the bedroom, though Harry did have to run up for the lube. After thorough but torturous preparation, Harry rode Tom’s cock on the sofa, almost chest to chest, and it was awfully romantic as they kissed, murmuring words into each other’s ears.

All until Tom grew frustrated with the torturous pace Harry kept and flipped them over, putting Harry on his hands and knees and fucking him so hard and so *good*, that Harry came all over the sofa beneath him as soon as Tom got his hand in his hair and yanked back, completely untouched.

Afterwards, (after Harry had cleaned up both the sofa and himself, laughing all the while), they put only their boxers on and got themselves another glass of wine before going to the piano.

It was peaceful in the chapel, Harry’s head on Tom’s shoulder as he listened to him play, the last rays of sunlight peeking through the stained glass and washing over them.

As he listened to the notes of Chopin’s *Prélude in E minor* ring out in the space, Tom’s elegant fingers dancing over the keys, Harry knew this wasn’t the end.

The end of his time at the school, certainly; but it was also the beginning of the rest of his life.

—Scene eleven—

Settling in at Sirius's was the most natural thing in the world after sharing the small space of the chapel with six other boys for a year. His house was massive, and Harry's bedroom was far enough away from the other bedrooms that he and Tom had total privacy, as well as their own bathroom.

Alphard was a nice addition to the home, always up for a game, or for watching a film. Harry often walked in on him chatting away with Sirius or Remus at the kitchen table, or on the sofa. He loved Sirius's house, constantly saying how much nicer it was than the Blacks' townhouse that Walburga had inherited from their parents.

The drive down to London with Tom had been a very fun thing. They'd swapped every couple hours or so, Tom looking unfairly attractive behind the wheel of Harry's Ford Escort. They got lost a couple of times, they listened to Harry's cassettes, full of rock that Tom initially hated but ended up nodding his head to as he drove. The drive had taken twelve hours instead of the foreseen eight and a half—because they'd gotten lost, but also because they'd stopped many times for drinks and such, treating it as a road trip, and also because they'd had to stop three times to get each other off in the backseat, windows fogging up as the car rocked.

It was ridiculous, but it was the best car trip Harry had ever been a part of.

Tom slowly made himself at home at Sirius's too—thankfully, Sirius had fulfilled Harry's wish of taking the poster of Chris Lestrange down, as he'd asked him to. He started taking up space, the bedroom becoming as much his as it was Harry's. His shoes found their place by the front door, his coats hung on the communal coat rack.

He quickly learnt his way around the mansion, as he called it, and took trips to the kitchen and other such places by himself after a while. Harry loved going to look for him only to find him chatting with Sirius or Remus amicably. His favourite had been when he'd walked in on Sirius explaining the Black family tree to him, and their heritage, and he'd heard Tom say, "Harry told me you're all named after constellations or stars, why is that?"

He'd smiled like an idiot all night.

In the months after they settled in, Sirius made true on his promise to take them all to the sexual health clinic, the doctor's for a general checkup, the dentist's, and, to Harry and Tom's horror, the therapist's.

["I appreciate the thought, Sirius, truly," Tom said, trying to hide a cringe, "but I am not doing therapy."

"Come on Tom," Sirius insisted amicably, putting a hand on his shoulder, "I was sceptical at first too, but I think you could all really benefit from it."

So, just because they wanted to make Sirius happy, they all agreed to a trial session. They all went together, with Sirius, and Alphard went in first. He came out crying his eyes out an hour

later, and alarmed Harry so much he went in tense and awkward. He ended up talking about rugby, of all things, despite the well-meaning therapist's attempts at redirecting the conversation to his potential trauma, simply because he did not want to talk about it. And Tom, well—Tom spent the entire hour in utter silence, apparently, and when they finished it looked like the therapist needed a drink.

Alphard continued going to therapy, Harry and Tom did not.]

As the months wore on, the three of them, along with the other four boys, met up with producers on the West End and followed through with having their play shown on their stages. They went through some editing processes with other writers who were eager to take into account anything they had to say, and by the end of it even Tom was more than happy with the finalised product.

Alphard stayed on the team, along with Gaspar, to work with the actors and producers for a year in setting the play up. The rest of them preferred to move onto new projects, though they all promised to be available if help was needed, and they would obviously go and watch the play be performed.

Harry and Tom got regular updates from Alphard anyway, so they were as involved as they could be. They'd decided to take some time to weigh their options.

Sirius, true to his word, introduced them all, even Alphard and Gaspar, to people in his agency. They were all signed to various agents, and welcomed with open arms. Theo was the first one to audition for a role he wanted in a film, and he actually got the part. Mere months after finishing school, he was well on his way to success.

Tom was next on the list, of course, and Harry couldn't have been prouder. They'd celebrated by inviting all the other boys, as well as Ron and Hermione, to Sirius's for a small party that ended with half of them blackout drunk in the living room. Sirius didn't touch a drop of alcohol.

Tom's role was a big one, in a long awaited film, and his casting had caused some noise in the press, and he was already being heralded for interviews.

Harry, for his part, didn't really know what he wanted to do. No particular films caught his attention, nor did any plays. After the whirlwind of the year he'd had, he was happy to just sit back and relax for a while.

It was on the 31st of October, though, that Sirius came up to him in the living room where he was reading alone. Tom had taken what Harry had come to think of as their car to meet with the cast for his film, and he was more or less just waiting for him to get back. The fire was crackling in the fireplace, and the room was dark because of how grey it was out. He had a lamp on, casting it in an orange light, illuminating the clutter Harry associated with Sirius's chaotic way of life. He had a cup of tea on the coffee table, and he was thinking of asking Tom out on a date when he got back.

"Hi, kid," Sirius said, sitting down on the sofa at Harry's feet. His tone and nervous manner already told Harry something was up, and he slid the dried purple lilacs in between the pages

of his book—he'd kept them, as a bookmark—and sat up.

"Hiya, what is it? Everything okay?" he asked, stretching back. His neck ached, he'd been hunched over for too long.

"Fine," Sirius said quickly, putting a hand on his ankle, "I was just wondering if you'd come somewhere with me?"

"Yeah, 'course, where?"

"Rather not say," Sirius said vaguely as he got up. Then, putting some preppiness into his voice to hide the apprehension: "Let's go then."

Harry frowned, sitting up and crossing his legs. "Where are you taking me?"

"You'll see," Sirius said, dropping the act. "Promise it's nowhere bad. And you'll be back in time to see your precious Tom."

Harry rolled his eyes, huffing. "Fine then. But we're taking your car, Tom's got ours."

The car ride was spent in mostly silence. Harry gripped the handle on the car door, stomach swooping with Sirius's frankly dangerous driving habits, as the radio blasted a Bowie record at full volume.

To Harry's—surprisingly—absolute *horror*, they were on a road he'd recognise anywhere. The one to his parents' house.

"Sirius—" he said as they parked in front of the hauntingly familiar facade in the deserted driveway.

"Bambi," Sirius said calmly, turning to face him as he turned the ignition off, "listen, I can explain."

"What are we doing here?" Harry asked, frozen. His knuckles were white around the handle on the door, and his eyes were fixed on the house. The windows were empty, dark, lifeless. The beige facade was overgrown with ivy. The garden, oddly enough, was well kept. The rose bushes were thriving, there were even potted plants by the blue front door.

It looked almost like the last time he had seen it; a week after the accident, when he'd come to collect his things. He'd never really wondered what had happened to the house after that, too eager to move on from it. He knew he'd never find home in it again—how could he, when it was his parents that made it feel like home?

"Listen, kid," Sirius said, a hand on his wrist, "when your parents had you they did the very adult and responsible thing of writing a will. They insisted everything go to you, except the house which would go to me. They trusted me to do what was right, for *you*."

Harry turned to him slowly, feeling so out of his depth he could do nothing but latch onto the comfort Sirius's presence offered him.

“Of course, they never expected it to actually happen,” Sirius said regretfully. “I wondered, for years, what to do with it. I told myself I’d just sell it, transfer the money to your bank account, but it never felt right.” He took a breath, letting it out shakily as he looked back towards the house. “So I decided I’d wait until you were old enough, let you decide what to do.”

“Sell it,” Harry said, squeezing his eyes shut as his heart clenched at his own words. It hurt, to see the house again, to see it *empty*—but there was something about someone else living in it that hurt even more.

Sirius held onto his hand. “I’ve had cleaners come in every two weeks for years, to dust and make sure everything’s alright. Same for the garden, it gets tended to once a month.”

“I don’t—” Harry was inexplicably choked up, shaking his head as he snapped his mouth shut.

“Listen,” Sirius said, shifting forward, trying to get Harry’s attention, “I want you to come inside with me, and I want you to look around. If you still want to sell after that, that’s fine, it’s completely up to you. But if you change your mind, we can go to my lawyer’s this afternoon and we can sign it over to you.”

“You want me to *live* here?” Harry asked, a bit hysterical.

“I’m not kicking you out,” Sirius said reassuringly. “Of course I’m not, I’m just saying that this is an option for you. There’s even a third option where we keep this situation, it stays in my name and I look after it until you’re ready to make a decision, okay? There’s no pressure, kiddo, just—please come inside with me, yeah?”

Harry was quiet for a while, eyes riveted on the house. He could see it now, the kitchen counters that seemed infinitely tall, the stairs that he’d slide down on his arse, the living room with its fluffy carpet and comfortable sofas, covered in his mum’s warm blankets that the three of them would huddle under as they watched films, Harry being as quiet as possible so that they wouldn’t notice it was past his bedtime. His parents’ room, *his* room—he could see it all.

“How much has it changed?” he asked feebly.

“Quite a bit,” Sirius said slowly, being careful of what he said. “The furniture that’s left is covered in white sheets, to protect it from the dust, you know? It’s less cluttered, I didn’t sell anything, but I did put some stuff in boxes, like your old toys and stuff—your mum and dad’s personal items, stuff like that.”

“What—what about photos?” Harry asked, leaning forward until his forehead hit the glove compartment. The hallways between the kitchen and living room, as well as all up the stairs, had been lined with framed photos. Harry with his parents, them with Sirius and Remus, his mum and Snape, all of them at school, Harry on Sirius’s motorbike, his dad’s parents.

“They’re all still up,” Sirius murmured reluctantly.

Harry took a breath, closing his eyes. He stayed like that for a while, trying to decide what he wanted to do. He couldn't shake the flickering shine of too bright blue and red police lights in his peripheral vision when he thought too much about it—when he caught sight of the step in front of the front door.

Eventually, he sat back up and pressed his head into the headrest, chin up and eyes closed. Jaw clenched, he bit his lip to stop the pained sob that was stuck in his throat. "I wish Tom was here," he said, voice going up in pitch as he fought back the tears.

"Do you want us to come back when he's with us?" Sirius asked immediately.

Harry sighed, hating himself for saying something like that when he had Sirius right next to him. He squeezed his hand still in his and tilted his head toward him, eyes cracking open slowly as he tried for a little smile, shaking his head. "No," he whispered, "I'll be okay with you."

"You'll come in then?" Sirius asked hopefully.

He nodded again, unclicking the seatbelt still holding him in place. Sirius hurried to get out of the car, and Harry followed up to the front door mechanically, watching him fumble with the keys.

Just as he was about to open the door, he turned back to Harry, and said, "It doesn't smell like them anymore."

And Harry didn't know if that reassured him or broke his heart. He just nodded, hands stuffed in the pocket of his jumper. When Sirius went into the house, he forced himself to follow, carefully stepping *over* the front step—the one where he'd been standing when the police officer crouched down to tell him what had happened.

It was a big house, smaller than Sirius's, more family oriented, but still big. The entrance hall held the grand-ish staircase, and archways to the kitchen, dining room, and living room. There was also a sunroom off the living room, and a bathroom and a utility room through the kitchen. Upstairs, he knew he'd find three bedrooms, another bathroom, an office more commonly used as a music room, and a library.

It was strange, how Harry couldn't remember the fine details of the house he'd grown up in, but recognised the sound of his feet on the floor like a slap to the face.

"You okay?" Sirius asked when he turned around to see Harry still hovering in the doorway, one hand on the security of the door itself.

He nodded quickly, closing the door behind him—more to stop himself from bolting than anything else.

"Okay, come on," Sirius said, holding out a hand for Harry to take. He did, avoiding the photos on the walls around him. He couldn't quite look at them yet.

That's how they looked around the house, hand in hand, Harry taking small steps, hesitant. He wasn't crying, but there were tears dripping from his eyes from time to time, which he wiped away silently. The whole visit passed in silence, in fact.

They went through the kitchen, which seemed unfairly sterile, as if his mum had never baked in there, or his dad had never cooked. The bathrooms looked like they were straight out of an Ikea display, as did most of the house; most harrowing of all being the bedrooms.

Strangely enough, it was the hallways that Harry recognised most from his childhood; the photos holding the memories of a time when the house had been a home.

They finished the visit in the living room, which felt a lot more familiar, because when Sirius took off the sheet on Harry's favourite sofa, the blankets were still there. His mum's artwork was still hung on the wall, though it wasn't visible, covered by a protective sheet.

"Let's sit down for a second," Sirius said, gesturing to the sofa.

Harry went mechanically, sitting down on one of the comfiest sofas in the world stiffly.

"Look, Harry," Sirius said, sitting next to him, bending his leg to face him properly, clasping his hands in his, "I know what it's like now, it's cold and unfamiliar. I remember how warm and lovely it was here, and I know you do too."

Another tear dripped down Harry's cheek and he wiped it away quickly. "Yeah because mum and dad made it like that."

"That's not true," Sirius stated insistently. "It was like that because it was lived in, and loved. It wasn't just your mum and dad that made the house a home, it was you too. I remember coming here, and the first thing I'd hear would be you laughing your head off. It wasn't James or Lily that put a smile on my face when I walked through that door, it was you. Always."

Harry looked at him, frowning. "What are you trying to say?"

"I think you can make this house a home again, kiddo," he said with an encouraging smile. "You and Tom. What do you think?"

Harry sighed, eyes darting around the room. There was something…nice, about being here again. He recognised every angle, knew where to step to avoid the creaks in the floorboard. But wouldn't it be the opposite of moving on? Moving forward?

"I dunno," he said honestly, sinking into the back of the sofa.

"Let me tell you what I think as your Godfather," Sirius said, uncharacteristically serious, and Harry couldn't help but allocate all his attention to him. "Since your parents died you haven't had a single stable home, your mum's relatives were awful, you switched schools twice. Sadly, my house wasn't any better for you, and I'm so sorry for that. School was only a year after all that, and while you loved it, you always knew it wasn't definite. And we both know your stay at mine now is temporary. You need stability, Harry, to be able to move on in your

life. You've got Tom, and that's great, but you need a more solid foundation than just a boyfriend. Whether you make a home for yourself here or elsewhere, that's fine, and I'll help you settle down whatever you choose, but you do need a home, love."

Harry nodded sadly, recognising the truth in Sirius's words. "And you think that should be here?"

"I think this is a place where you have a lot of happy memories, and you can use that to build upon. The place is familiar to you, it's a beautiful house, and it's already yours."

Harry sighed again, eyes drifting over to the sun room attached to the living room. It was full of light, even though it was grey outside. There was nothing but a single ray of sunshine shining through the glass, and he recalled the times his mum had sung to him and his dad in there. The memory overlapped with the vision of Tom sitting in there on a sunny day, reading quietly. They could have a piano in there, it was certainly big enough.

For the first time since he'd stepped foot in the house, it felt *good* to be back. Through the thick layers of grief caked onto the walls, he could glimpse the love hidden behind it.

"How's this," Sirius said with a smile, shaking his arm gently, "let's come back tomorrow with Tom, see what he thinks. It's only fair to let him give his opinion if he's moving in too."

Harry smiled, and the air in the room didn't feel so stale. The room didn't seem so big and sterile, a ghost of the warmth it used to hold, of the colour. "Yeah, okay," he murmured.

Sirius's grin was blinding, and Harry wondered for a second how he could've ever thought that his Godfather didn't love him. "Alright, let's go back to mine then," he said, getting up, "you can think about anything you might want to get rid of or any work you'd want done. I understand that you might not want to keep it exactly as it is."

"Okay," Harry said agreeably, though he didn't think there'd be anything he'd truly want to change.

—Scene twelve—

Harry eyed the magazine sitting on the window ledge. On the cover was Tom, standing tall, dressed in all black, contrasting with a white background. He had a hand in one of his trouser pockets, a suit jacket slung over his shoulder, and he was looking straight at the camera as his other hand lowered the designer sunglasses down the bridge of his nose.

He smiled at it, never tired of seeing it. Even though the whole Nation was seemingly in love with his boyfriend, at least he had the privilege of turning around and seeing him in real life. At that moment, Tom looked nothing like he did on the magazine cover. He was standing behind the stove, bent over the pot of hot chocolate Harry had made. He was wearing their shared jumper with the hood up and comfy trousers. Harry preferred him like that, thick Christmas socks and all.

“Harry there’s a skin forming,” he said, never looking away from the pot, sounding alarmed.

Harry laughed, pushing off the nook by the kitchen window where he’d been enjoying his coffee. It was Christmas morning, the first Christmas he’d spent in his parents’ house since he was seven. “Stop staring at it,” he chuckled, “you’re making it nervous.”

Their friends were coming soon for a whole day of Christmas celebrations, and a sort of house warming party. They hadn’t really had anyone over since the move, too busy actually moving in and chasing the staleness of years of abandonment from the house. It was coming along well, and they already felt quite settled.

They’d taken what used to be the guest bedroom for themselves, turning what used to be his parents’ room into the actual guest room. The rest of the house stayed as it was, aside from Harry fixing the paint here and there when he was bored. His favourite rooms were the kitchen, living room, and sunroom. Tom seemed quite partial to the library and the sunroom, and Harry always loved finding him in there, curled up as rain pattered against the glass, reading.

What Harry loved most about the house were the unmistakable parts of Tom that shone through. The bedsheets he’d chosen for them, the curtains in the sunroom. More than decoration choices though, Tom brought the little things that made the house a home. Harry’s favourite out of all of them was in the library, where Tom had set aside a shelf for anything of *theirs*; their copies of *Elio* stood on it, alongside scripts for films he was to play in, but, on the right hand side, in the corner, stood their copies of *Hamlet*, on which he’d each drawn half a heart—when set beside each other, they formed a whole.

He’d said nothing of this, of course, he did things like that secretly. When Harry had seen it he’d gotten a headrush so violent he’d had to sit down, fearing he was about to have a heart attack.

He’d also, on a random day, without preamble, tacked up the posters for *Elio*—that he’d apparently stolen—in the library. Tom could be outwardly romantic, but he also loved quietly.

“How am I making it nervous?” he asked, baffled, as Harry took over.

“It just needs the heat turning down a bit, you idiot,” Harry said fondly, doing just that and stirring it. “It’s just the milk.”

Tom hummed, leaning against the counter beside the stove. “When are you starting the cooking?”

“When everyone’s here and we’ve had a brew and stuff,” Harry said, stretching. They’d woken up merely a half hour earlier, and Tom had immediately demanded hot chocolate.

“Is it ready?” he asked, peering into the pot.

Harry huffed a laugh, going to grab a mug from the cabinet. “Yes, you absolute fiend.” He filled the mug up with a ladle after fishing the ‘skin’ off the surface, and handed it to him. “I hope you enjoy it.”

“It better be worth the wait,” Tom said haughtily, “I’ve been thinking about this for a year.”

Harry snorted, flicking his forehead. “Idiot.”

“It smells nice anyway.”

It did, the kitchen filling up with the familiar and comforting aroma of his dad’s hot chocolate with all the spices.

“You know my agent called me last night?” Tom said out of the blue, after a few minutes of him constantly blowing on the hot chocolate to cool it down.

Harry hummed in acknowledgement, having returned to his perch by the window. Snow had started sticking to the ground, and he wondered if he’d ever felt so peaceful as he watched a deer prance around in the field facing their house.

“She wanted to let me know they’re making a film that she wants me to audition for.”

“Oh, what is it?” Harry asked curiously. He had yet to audition for a role himself, but Tom had no such problem, he had jobs lined up for the next couple of years already.

“*Call me by your name*.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose. “Based on the novel? By—what’s his name? André Aciman, yeah?”

Tom nodded. “Exactly, she wants me to audition for Oliver.”

“The American?”

“Yes.”

“Can you even do an American accent?” Harry asked, amused.

Tom rolled his eyes. “Harry I faked being posh for seven years, quite convincingly, might I add. So yes, I can do an American accent.”

“Alright then,” Harry said, smiling. “And are you going to? Audition?”

Tom shrugged. “That depends.”

“On what?”

“On you.”

“On me?” Harry repeated, frowning in confusion. “Is it because it’s romantic?” He cringed, imagining it. “Yeah I suppose that will be a bit weird, seeing you kiss someone else and stuff, especially a bloke. But I’ll watch it, to support you. I might look away though for a few scenes, if you don’t mind.”

Tom laughed, shaking his head. “No, no,” he said, taking a sip of the hot chocolate and groaning. “God, this is really good.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, though he was more interested in the other subject. “What’s it got to do with me then?”

“Well,” Tom said, leaning against the island, “I don’t want to do romantic roles involving someone else for now anyway. *But*, I would consider it if it was with you.”

“I don’t think I follow,” Harry said slowly, frowning.

Tom rolled his eyes. “Do you even remember that you graduated with me? You’re also an actor, you know? I want you to audition for Elio, idiot.”

“Elio…?” Harry said in confusion. He wasn’t sure what the play had to do with this conversation, until it clicked. “Oh, *oh*,” he said, laughing at his own slowness, “the character, Elio? From the book?”

“Yes, Jesus Christ, Harry,” Tom said despairingly.

“Sorry,” he laughed, “it’s first thing in the morning, what do you expect?”

“Will you?” Tom asked hopefully. “We both like the novel and we’d be able to play together again.”

“Honestly?” Harry said, thinking it over. It would be a lot easier for his first role to be alongside Tom. “Yeah, I’d love to.”

“Really?” Tom said, looking extremely happy about it.

“Yeah,” Harry said with a laugh, “I love playing with you. And I actually really like the novel.”

“Brilliant,” Tom said happily. “I’ll let my agent know tomorrow. And you make sure to ring yours.”

“Yes,” Harry said dutifully. Tom loved to nag him about calling his agent, so now that he actually had a reason to, he would.

He left the kitchen to go and check the fridge in the utility room, making sure they had everything they needed for what he had planned for their meal. The fridge was full, and when he was satisfied they had everything, he went back into the kitchen.

He grabbed a handful of Tom’s arse as he went past him to get to the cabinets by the stove, quietly jubilating at being able to do so.

Tom hissed, tensing. “Careful,” he mumbled, “I’m still sore.”

“From last night?” Harry said, hiding a laugh as he plastered himself to Tom’s back once he’d made sure they had the right pots and oven trays.

“You weren’t exactly gentle,” Tom huffed, hands circling around his mug. From what Harry could see, he’d filled it up again when he was gone.

He laughed, pressing a kiss to his shoulder blade. “Well, you did keep begging me to go harder.”

Tom whirled around, caging himself in against the counter as he faced Harry. “I would hardly call it begging.”

Harry grinned up at him, biting his bottom lip. “Demanding then. You’re very bossy.”

Tom hummed, eyeing him disapprovingly, probably seeing through his thinly veiled want. “We’re running out of hot chocolate.”

Harry peered over his shoulder, to the pot quietly simmering on the stove behind him. “There’s enough there for everyone, seeing as though, unlike you, not everyone can drink unlimited amounts of it. One cup and you start to feel sick.”

Tom sniffed, leaning back against the counter invitingly. “Excuse me for being a poor, starved, mistreated orphan in my youth.”

Harry laughed, his hands leaving the counter to sneak under Tom’s jumper. “I can’t believe you’re pulling the orphan card to justify a sweet tooth.”

“You should feel honoured I only ever pull the orphan card with you,” Tom said pointedly.

Harry smiled, inching closer still. “I do,” he murmured. “I love you.”

Tom rolled his eyes but there was a smile pulling at his lips. “Wipe that look off your face, your friends will be here soon.”

“They were your friends before they were mine, for the most part,” Harry said, leaning forward until he could press open-mouthed kisses to Tom’s neck. “And I’ve got time to fuck you over the worktop, surely.”

Tom’s breath hitched as he tilted his head to the side the slightest amount, inviting Harry further in. “Would you even be able to reach?” he teased, utterly breathless.

“Bend over and we’ll find out,” Harry whispered into his ear, biting the lobe gently.

Tom groaned, turning his head until he could press their lips together, his pupils blown wide. Harry pressed him up against the island counter, licking the spicy chocolate taste off his tongue.

They were, of course, interrupted by people knocking on the door and making a racket in their driveway.

“For fuck’s sake,” Harry groaned, his hand halfway down Tom’s trousers. He kissed him again, just because he couldn’t quite pull away from him.

“Harry,” Tom said, and it was half a moan, half a reprimand. “Come on,” he said breathlessly, pushing him back, “go open the door.”

“Why do I have to go?” Harry complained, pulling back, hands on Tom’s waist, still pressing him into the counter.

“You started this,” Tom reminded him as the door was banged on again.

Harry huffed, pulling his jumper down to cover his cock, which was futile really, since his hair was probably a mess and the blush on his cheeks telling enough. “Fine.”

He pressed a last kiss to Tom’s mouth before traipsing over to the front door and unlocking it. When he opened it, it was to the eager faces of all their friends, including Ron and Hermione, as well as Sirius, Remus, and—to his surprise—Severus Snape. He’d invited him, of course, he just hadn’t expected him to actually show up. Amelia sadly couldn’t come, but Tom had gone to pick her up some time in early December for an afternoon to show her around the house.

“Oh, you were having sex. Are we interrupting?” Theo asked with a grin.

“Oh shut up,” Harry sniped, though he was smiling too. “Come in, come in.”

“Tommy pull your pants up I’m coming in!” Theo exclaimed as he rushed into the kitchen after giving Harry a very one-sided hug.

“Hi kiddo,” Sirius said, roughing his hair up. “Where do you want us?”

“You can go into the living room if you want,” Harry said happily as he hugged Remus.

“Here, Harry,” Hermione said, handing him two bottles of champagne and two bottles of orange juice, “for Buck’s fizz.”

“Oh, cheers, ‘mione.”

“Hi Harry,” Abraxas said with a grin, “we brought wine and whiskey, shall we find the kitchen and put it all there?”

“Yes please,” Harry said, already overwhelmed with everything he was holding. They all walked in, giving him a quick hug as they went past. “Professor,” he said finally when he was the only one still by the threshold.

He rolled his eyes. “Like I have said to your peers, you might as well call me Severus, Potter. Merry Christmas.”

Harry laughed, nodding as he shut the door behind him. “Merry Christmas to you too, Severus.”

Immediately, the quiet, peaceful morning turned into absolute mayhem. The two pairs of shoes by the door turned into twelve, and the silence that had prevailed in the house got overturned by chatter. It felt warmer, more festive.

They had fairy lights strewn all over the ground floor, through the kitchen, living room, and sunroom, as well as a tree up in the living room that they’d decorated together. It had been such a lovely afternoon, after they’d gone to the shopping centre to buy as many Christmas decorations as they could in the morning. Tom strung up the fairy lights along the ceiling, while Harry wrapped tinsel around the stair bannister, all while they listened to Christmas music.

It was cosy, homely, *magical*; and the company only served to enhance it.

As the day wore on, everyone made themselves at home on the many sofas and chairs in the living room. They drank hot chocolate to begin with, but quickly moved onto Buck’s fizz, and then wine. Harry cooked, with various people’s help throughout the day. When Tom joined him in the kitchen, he helped by looking pretty while Harry worked. He also swooped in to try various bits of ingredients, and opened the oven when it shouldn’t have been opened just to smell what was inside. For all means and purposes, he was a nuisance, but Harry loved him so much he didn’t tell him off once.

The house was filled with laughter and animated chatter, the snow continued to fall outside, and Harry was surrounded by the people he loved most in the world, in the only house he’d ever felt at home.

They exchanged presents, and played games while listening to Christmas songs on the TV. It was in the late afternoon though, that Theo tricked Harry and Tom into walking under the mistletoe he’d secretly tacked up over the living room archway.

Their friends found it so funny when Theo caught all their attention by drunkenly shouting, “Look! Harry and Tom are under the mistletoe. Oh, kissy kissy boys!”

Harry stopped short on his way to finally take a seat on the sofa and relax, looking up and catching sight of the bundled plant hanging above his head. He turned to Tom beside him,

and they shared an exasperated sort of smile.

Tom got a hand on his hip and pulled him closer, making Harry laugh as he, in turn, wrapped his arms around his shoulders. “I love you,” Tom whispered, though it was so quiet he might as well have mouthed the words.

Harry’s lips parted to say it back, but before he could Tom pressed closer and kissed him. Their friends cheered, idiots that they were, but Harry barely heard them as his breath was stolen away.

When they pulled back, Tom caught his eye and Harry smiled, arms tightening around his shoulders, keeping him close for a moment longer. The warmth in the air held nothing to the warmth in his heart; full, content, peaceful.

He loved, and he was loved in turn, and there was nothing more he wanted out of life. He was finally happy.

Chapter End Notes

It's over :(Please tell me what you thought in the comments, I hope you all liked it <3

I have memes for this fic I'll post them in the next few days when I have a little time so follow me on Tumblr!

Thank you for reading, and thank you to anyone who took the time to comment, I really appreciate it!

There *could* be some oneshots posted set in this universe in the future, so keep an eye out if you're interested. Anyway, thank you, see you soon xx <3

End Notes

Thank you to everyone for reading!

Here's a link to the tumblr post with the memes for this fic.

I'll see you soon for some shorter works x

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!